Make It Better
Gay Romance
Trina Solet

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By Trina Solet
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This story contains material intended for mature readers.

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The man sleeping next to Ray was the one he was afraid to dream about. He was the happiness Ray didn't dare to hope for. Until they met, he was satisfied with the simple pleasures of his life. But this man turned him greedy and made him forget to be content with what he had. He stirred Ray like no one else ever had.

Now he was so near, Ray could feel the warmth radiating from his body. Though Ray's mouth was very close to his shoulder, he didn't let his lips touch that skin. He didn't need to. Ray knew his taste. If he wanted to taste him again, all he had to do was lick his lips for the trace of him, for his imprint. Now that they were together, there wasn't any rush. He could wait and let his lover sleep because this man was his future.

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Lydia and Ray had spent an hour arguing about where they would go for lunch. As a vegan, she had limited choices on the menus of the places where Ray liked to eat. They had just settled on a vegetarian restaurant as a compromise when he got the phone call from Lionel and lunch was canceled.

Just hearing Lionel's voice was such a strong reminder. Ray's life was split into two parts along one straight line. There was his life before and his life after he met Lionel. And it was a fact of his new life that if Lionel called, Ray would drop everything and rushed over. Only it had never happened before.

It was strange for Lionel to summon him like this. He liked to throw his weight around, but he also liked to keep things on a more friendly footing, especially with Ray. Lionel was either too busy for niceties or whatever he wanted from Ray was very important. Ray had always been glad to be treated like a good though less fortunate friend and not like someone who owed everything he had to Lionel's past generosity. Lionel had saved him from a miserable existence on the street and all the degradation and hopelessness that went with it. Ray wouldn't call what he had then a life. He survived and existed though he sometimes didn't know why. What he had now was a life, and a good one thanks to Lionel. So that Friday on his lunch break from a job Lionel had helped him get, Ray went to see him. He was a little apprehensive but determined to be of use to his benefactor.

Lionel had moved twice since Ray lived with him, each time to some

impressive high-rise apartment. This latest one was a penthouse where Ray had been once before on a casual visit to spend an evening with Lionel and "help him relax", as he put it. The penthouse overlooked the city with the green tops of trees sometimes intruding among the buildings. It was an impressive view. When the sky turned different colors at sunrise and sunset, or the clouds formed interesting patterns, it was even pretty. Ray found Lionel reclining in his rooftop garden, though his cellphone was next to his glass of expensive brandy, and his laptop was close at hand. As usual, he wasn't just taking it easy in that beautiful space. There were small trees among the shrubbery and flowers that were paced naturally all around. If it wasn't for the view of other rooftops in every direction, one could believe that they weren't standing on top of a building but in a real garden. Ray could hear birds chirping among the flowering trees. The place smelled like a real garden, earthy, green and perfumed with blossoms. It was a little disorienting.

Lionel invited him to sit across from him and offered him a drink. There was no mention of lunch. That was an unusual oversight on Lionel's part. As he took the drink on an empty stomach, Ray noticed Lionel's manner lacked its usual welcome. The way his eyes strayed toward the horizon as he frowned, Ray could tell he was preoccupied. He wondered if what troubled Lionel had anything to do with the favor he was going to ask of him.

Ray had on his light beige suit with a light blue shirt and no tie, and he was a little warm. Feeling that this was an almost formal occasion, he left the jacket on. He had worn an outfit just like it for his first day of work at TSS. He had been nervous, but he received an approving nod from Mr. Kincaid after he looked him over. Now he wore different variations of that foolproof outfit all the time and thought of it as a sort of work uniform. He had been told that it brought out his "honey brown eyes and golden hair" by a flirtatious sales representative. He turned out to be even better at giving head than giving compliments. Ray stopped himself from further thoughts like those which certainly wouldn't help to bring down the temperature.

Lionel was dressed in black slacks and a white shirt open at the neck with the sleeves rolled up. The simple outfit showed off his toned body, his olive skin and handsomely graying hair. Before he started to speak, Lionel ran his hand through the thick, wavy hair Ray had just been admiring. Though he was nervous, not knowing what Lionel would ask him to do for him, Ray also had that safe, protected feeling he had felt ever since he first met him.

Lionel had been a little drunk then but surprisingly gentle. He was a man who knew how to take his time in pursuit of pleasure. Ray had enjoyed him more than anyone for a long time. Taking Ray's hand as he was about to leave for some less pleasant encounter, Lionel had looked at him, smiled, and offered to take him home. Their time together didn't last long, less than a year, but it changed Ray's life. Ray decided that whatever Lionel wanted from him, he would do without a word of complaint. With everything he could, he

would show Lionel his gratitude and try to repay him.

Surprising him, Lionel took Ray's hand in his. Ray was taken back to that moment in the hotel room when Lionel had smelled of booze but also masculine and pleasant, and he had asked Ray to come home with him. When he had agreed, Lionel took him in his arms and kissed him for a long time. As much as he enjoyed the kiss, Ray didn't yet know how lucky he was to be in the arms of a man like him. Now Lionel's hand felt warm and strong. Ray knew that this time there would be no enticing offer to follow his touch. But once again, like back then, he felt like Lionel needed him. Ray looked into his eyes, and he couldn't help smiling. Lionel smiled too though a minute before he had looked so worried.

"There you go, making everything better," Lionel said and let go of his hand to lean back and look at him fondly.

"Me?" Ray said confused because he had just been thinking that same thing about him.

"Sometimes just thinking about you lifts my mood," Lionel said. He put on a teasing smile so Ray couldn't take him too seriously.

"Any time you want me to put a smile on your face, just call me over," Ray offered. He said it like it was a joke, but he meant it. Sure Lionel knew he could have him just by snapping his fingers, but Ray also wanted to let him know that he wanted him and always would.

"Do you think you could do the same thing for someone else? Someone very dear to me." Lionel frowned again. The look on his face was almost pained.

"Anything I can do I will." Ray was quick to answer. He wanted to take away that pained look from Lionel's face. He wanted to help him, not just because he owed him, but because Lionel was important to him, and if Ray could take away his trouble and worry, he would.

"I need you to do something vital," he said quietly. "If you can do it tonight, that would be best."

Lionel spoke almost as if he was going to skip over the actual favor he wanted him to do. But Ray waited patiently for him to tell him more.

Lionel was thoughtful for a moment so Ray jumped in to say that he was free that night. Even if he wasn't, he would have cleared his schedule. Lionel smiled again this time at Ray's eagerness to please him.

"My nephew needs you. Well, he needs something. And I've decided it's you." Lionel gave him a hard look which Ray didn't take personally. He could tell how much this still unknown problem was weighing on him.

"I'll do what I can. Do you want me to show him a good time or a really good time?" he risked a joke and Lionel took it fairly well. He also took his question seriously and told him what he expected.

"Give him your time and your attention and whatever else you think he needs. I'll trust you to decide the details."

Happy to be trusted, Ray nodded in agreement.

“What can you tell me about him?” Ray was ready for whatever he might say. He knew something had to be wrong for Lionel to ask him to give this guy his time but also from the way Lionel was acting.

Another pained look confirmed that things were serious. Instead of answering, Lionel held his breath and looked away. Ray wasn’t going to press him. If he couldn’t tell him more, he would go in blind. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Lionel’s gaze didn’t return to him as he spoke. His voice was rough with emotion.

“Marcus was driving his stepbrother and stepsister to school. Her to middle school. His stepbrother to high school. His stepbrother was a typical teenager, hotheaded, obnoxious, the usual. He and Marcus were having an argument. It got heated. Marcus was driving a little too aggressively. His stepsister told him to slow down, but he was mad. Then it started to rain. When it first starts to rain, that’s the worst time to be driving crazy.” Lionel paused. He steeled himself to tell him the rest. “There was a crash. The car jumped the curb and flipped. Marcus was injured but he survived. His stepbrother and stepsister didn’t. Legally he wasn’t at fault, but in every other way he was. His stepmother … you can imagine. Loosing two children while Marcus is at the wheel and only he survives. I can’t blame her for heaping all that guilt on him. But Marcus is my main concern. His well being is my priority. He stopped going to his classes at the college. He hardly eats or sleeps. Instead, he walks the city like a blind man, goes nowhere, just walks and walks until he exhausts himself.”

Ray guessed that Lionel must have had his nephew followed to know where he went, but he didn’t say anything. He knew that Lionel had done it out of concern.

“"What about therapy?” Ray asked.

“He refuses any kind of therapy. He’s been sinking, drowning. I don’t even recognize him.” Lionel took a swallow of his drink.

Ray remembered the drink in his own hand and had a gulp. He looked up to find Lionel looking straight into his eyes.

“He tried to steal his father’s gun.” Lionel looked down at his feet like he didn’t want to say any more, but then he did. “I don’t have to tell you what he’s likely to want to use it for. He seems to have backed away from the idea for now. Maybe he realized how much pain he would be causing on top of everything else. But that he went that far, had the gun in his hand. We’re all afraid.”

Ray could tell how much the thought horrified him. Lionel looked at him again, his expression earnest, almost begging.

“That’s why I need you. Do you understand?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ray said with all the seriousness the subject was due. Though he didn’t know how much help he could be, he was determined to try.

“Just do your best. That’s all I expect,” Lionel said almost like he didn’t

have much hope that it would do any good. But then he added, "And be yourself."

"I don't know how to be anyone else," Ray said half jokingly, but he knew what Lionel meant. He didn't want him to put on an act. "I won't try to cheer him up. I'll just be there for him."

"That will do him good all by itself." Lionel stood up. Ray thought it might be a signal that it was time for him to leave so he stood up too. With his drink in his hand, Lionel went to the railing of his rooftop garden.

"He might not be too friendly. So be ready," Lionel warned him while looking at the view with the clouds darkening in the distance though it was still bright and clear overhead.

Thinking about it, Ray realized then that a depressed guy like Marcus wouldn't be eager to go out and meet new people.

"How did you get him to agree to see me?" he asked.

"Blackmail," Lionel answered simply. He turned away from the view and smiled wryly. Seeing Ray's worried look, he explained, "I'm putting a good friend of his through medical school. A wonderful kid from a very poor and troubled family. I wouldn't dream of withdrawing financial support from him. But I told Marcus I would unless he met with you as many times as you ask to see him."

Ray was stunned and must have looked it.

"Don't worry. As fond as I am of him, Marcus has always had a rather low opinion of me." Lionel looked strangely pleased as he said that. He clearly didn't blame his nephew for how he felt. "Marcus thinks I'm controlling and overbearing, that I want to own people."

Ray was already shaking his head, ready to jump in and defend Lionel from all these charges though they did have a ring of truth to them. Lionel stopped him before he could say even one word in protest.

"He's mostly right," Lionel said with melancholy self-awareness. Then he added in his own defense, "I like to know who I can count on."

"You can count on me," Ray told him though he already knew that. He owed Lionel so much, and he didn't like to hear anyone badmouthing him.

Lionel saw him frowning.

"Don't hold it against him. Marcus is still young. When I leave him every cent I've got, we'll see how he handles it."

Seeing his sly expression when he said that, Ray had a hunch.

"He doesn't know you're leaving him everything, does he?"

"No," Lionel said confirming that Ray's guess had been right. He looked a little bit proud of Ray for his insight. "In fact, I specifically told him I would be leaving him exactly five bucks so he could buy himself some manners."

"Manners cost five bucks?" Ray blurted out.

"Manners don't cost anything. The five bucks is symbolic," Lionel said with good humor. "You'll be good for him," he said as he looked at Ray. "You are always good for me."

The wind was picking up a little bringing the clouds overhead. The rooftop garden shook with the strong breeze. A few leaves and petals flew off as Lionel and Ray stood facing each other. Ray liked how Lionel was looking at him. Even as the wind was cooling him off, Lionel's look was warming him up inside.

"I promise I'll be good to him, and then we'll see, I guess," Ray said not wanting to guarantee more than he could deliver.

"That's the plan. I'll be the bastard uncle. You be the nice guy, and between us, He'll be right as rain in no time." Lionel was being more positive than he felt as he raised his glass to Ray's. The glasses clinked, almost empty now. As he finished off the last little bit of brandy and set his glass down, Ray did have to say one thing.

"Tough love is still love. I bet Marcus knows that," he told Lionel before he left.

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Ray was becoming more confident all the time. Lionel wondered if there would come a day when he would refuse him, maybe even turn his back on his old friend. He doubted it. Ray had a core of deep loyalty that was more than indebtedness. He remembered what he had seen when he first met Ray. In his eyes, Lionel had seen a light just begin to die out. He had indulged himself when he hired Ray. But it was meant to be only a brief indulgence. One night spent in his company wasn't enough though. And seeing that the life Ray was living was starting to smother and extinguish the light inside him, Lionel obeyed an impulse and took him home.

He didn't do it selflessly though. It was a difficult time in Lionel's life. Just looking at Ray, he had known that he would bring warmth into the cold darkness of his world. He knew that when he came home, there would be a happy face to greet him and an eager body to embrace him. For someone so sweet, that boy sure could fuck.

Letting him go had been a struggle. Though he delayed it as long as he could, it had to be done for Ray. He had to start his real life, find his own way in the world. He deserved true happiness more than anyone. But even though he had let him fly away, Ray was always there if he needed him. And he never saw in him the same apprehension shown by others who owed him more. Lionel knew that was because Ray had real affection for him. It pained him a little to have to send him to Marcus. And if things weren't so grave, he would have not let them meet. Lionel had a feeling that in saving Marcus, he might lose Ray for good.

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As he walked back to work on crowded sidewalks, Ray got a text. It was just a phone number and the name Marcus. Ray saved it and decided to call when he had a little more privacy and when he wouldn't have to worry that the honking of impatient drivers on the busy street would drown out his words. The cloudy weather which threatened rain was making both the drivers and the pedestrians edgy. Everyone was hurrying to get places before it started pouring.

Ray wasn't worried about the weather. He was thinking about Lionel. Before now Lionel had never talked about his family. At one time, Ray thought he might even have children of his own, perhaps from some doomed, early marriage. But what he said about Marcus made it pretty clear that he thought of him almost like a son. That made Ray's mission even more important. He was being trusted, relied on, and for something so serious. He was supposed to save Marcus's life. The enormity of that stopped him in the middle of the sidewalk. People jostled him a little as they pushed past. All of them were on their way back from lunch or appointments, rushing to work just like he was supposed to be. He hurried to TSS, Tobbler Specialty Surfaces, so he wouldn't be too late. Ray owed that job to Lionel and he wanted to keep it at all costs. He wasn't really worried. All he had to say to Mr. Kincaid was that he had been meeting with Lionel Dullas, and he would be off the hook.

Between the calls he made for work and taking down customer's orders, Ray found a quiet moment and called the number Lionel had sent him. His conversation with Marcus didn't take long. Marcus was terse, but he agreed to everything – day, time, location. It was the easy agreement of someone who didn't care. On top of that, he was acting under duress. Ray sighed after he hung up. It wasn't going to be easy to win him over.

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After work, Ray rushed to the store first and then he rushed home. The streets were wet with rain. It had stopped raining a while ago and the sky was clearing, leaving everything shiny and gray. Ray was expecting Marcus at seven. That left him just enough time to make some food, make his apartment presentable, and make himself presentable. Ray did the last thing first by taking a quick shower. Then he picked up a lot of shoes and clothes he had carelessly thrown around the apartment in the last week or so. He made a solemn vow to do laundry that weekend. Unless he had something better to do.

Since he didn't know what Marcus liked, he made a few smaller dishes. Also, he didn't want to overwhelm him with a big plate of food when he was

depressed and maybe not eating much. Though Ray had considered that Marcus might not have much of an appetite, he hadn't thought of everything. Ray should have asked him if he ate meat. Just to be safe, he put those nice pieces of chicken in the freezer and stuck to vegetarian food. Ray put out of his mind the frightening thought that Marcus might be a vegan like Lydia. Even though he had taught himself to cook all kinds of new things, that was too much of a challenge right now. Ray made pasta with mushrooms in a cream sauce. Sautéed baby carrots got a honey glaze and slivered almonds. Ray sautéed sugar snap peas too but paired them with cashews and soy sauce then he put them over jasmine rice. He baked some corn muffins with cheddar. Ray would usually add jalapenos, but he couldn't risk making them hot in case he didn't like that.

While the food finished cooking, he set the table and organized the serving dishes. Then he realized too late that his dinner was a hodgepodge of different cuisines. It didn't go together at all. What had he been thinking? He must have been nervous. Ray wasn't an experienced cook, but even he should be able to do better than this. And what was his dessert? Two pears on two plates with a little, sharp knife next to each one. They were two expensive, luscious looking pairs. Each one of them weighed more than a bowling ball so they promised to be juicy and delicious. But they looked lame as the only dessert.

The kitchen smelled amazing though. And Ray smelled exactly like the kitchen, which on him wasn't as appetizing. Now Ray had to take another shower and change his clothes again. He worried that Marcus might arrive while he was in the shower so he turned off the shower every few seconds at any hint of the sound of the doorbell or a knock.

His first choice outfit was now stinky with cooking smells. Ray went for his second choice. It was a gray polo shirt with a tiny pattern of yellow stars. He considered it his lucky shirt, but he had passed it over for tonight as too whimsical. He put it on and grabbed his favorite jeans instead of fussing over other possible choices. Immediately starting to second guess himself, he hoped he didn't look too careless or casual. And of course his hair didn't look as good as it did after the first shower. It was wavy and light brown and the humidity of the shower had made it misbehave. It was lopsided and probably still smelled like food. Ray hadn't dared to wash it so soon before his guest was supposed to arrive or he would look like a drowned rat.

He usually looked better when he played host, and he wasn't usually such a nervous wreck. Having a guy come over was something he always looked forward to. Ray liked to show off his new cooking skills, even his apartment though it wasn't impressive. Ray loved that everything was his, all chosen by him. His last apartment was a little box with paper thin walls. It came already furnished in a drab, depressing, institutional style. That's where he lived after he moved out of Lionel's. Lionel had offered to put him somewhere nicer, but Ray didn't want that. He wanted a taste of independence. He wanted to pay

for his own place with the money from the first job Lionel got him. He was pretty sure Lionel was proud of him for that. Ray was definitely proud of himself. That sad little place was all his, his own poor kingdom.

After the little furnished box, this apartment was a palace. Its empty floors and blank walls were an open invitation to Ray. His sense of style was nothing exciting. Ray used light green, light blue, and beige so his place would be like a day at the beach. Old movie posters were on the walls. It was like having a whole movie up there, and everyone liked them. Ray liked his knick knacks to be unique, touchable with a lot of detail so they looked like someone might have written secrets into them. Ray didn't mind if guests picked them up to study them up close. To him, playing host wasn't about impressing his dates. It was about fun. Plus there was the sex afterward to look forward to. Nothing serious ever came of his dates. But it was still nice, better than nice if the sex was good.

This time, the chance of sex was slim to none. And playing host to a depressed, suicidal guy who had recently suffered, or even caused, a tragedy, was guaranteed not to be fun. And there was the added pressure of letting down Lionel if he failed to make a positive impression.

Knowing that meeting Marcus in this kind of state would guarantee disaster. Ray forced himself to calm down. After all, Lionel had chosen him for the job for a reason. He had entrusted him with his nephew because he was the right one to reach out to him. Resolving himself, he swore that he would make Marcus feel welcome and that he would trust his instincts.

Ray was ready now, but Marcus hadn't arrived yet. His being late threatened to undo all the pep talks Ray had given himself. Anxiously eyeing the clock, he was reassured that Marcus was only ten minutes late. But even the slightest movement of the minute hand convinced him that Marcus wasn't coming. Ray was letting Lionel down. And what if something happened to Marcus? The sound of the doorbell was a welcome relief. If it turned out to be Mrs. Brewer ringing his doorbell to ask him if he'd seen her cat, he would wring her neck.

Just as he opened the door to Marcus, Ray remembered what he had forgotten to buy.

"I don't have any wine," were his first words of greeting to Marcus instead of the more appropriate "Hello, my name is Ray. Welcome to my home."

"I don't drink wine," were Marcus's first words of greeting to him.

"Oh good. Hi, I'm Ray. And I have other beverages." Ray sounded out of breath as he invited him in. But he could almost swear that he saw the beginnings of a smile as Marcus walked past him.

"Hi. Marcus," he said confirming what Ray already knew. Marcus had a warm, deep voice, a little like Lionel's but less commanding and more mellow. He was wearing a jacket, and Ray's cooking had made the apartment

warm. He took off the jacket and, after looking at Ray for approval, threw it over the back of the couch.

Now as Ray stood there awkwardly, not sure what to do, he could have a good look at Marcus. He had his uncle's dark good looks, though he was way too thin. But he hadn't always been. Ray could tell by how he didn't fill his clothes. Seeing him, he wished he had made even more food and to hell with what kind. Marcus's hair was very dark and short, though if he had to guess, he would say it was wavy and thick and would turn gray beautifully. There was a shadow of stubble on his face. He probably wasn't too worried about his appearance in his state of mind. Looking at his body, Ray could see traces of a compact built that had been starved recently. That is to say, he was a little shorter than Ray but would be stronger looking if he took care of himself. Ray needed to bulk up a little himself. Marcus watched him with not very big, dark eyes as Ray stood there staring at him like an idiot. The look in Marcus's eyes was a little questioning but in a nice way. Even in his troubled state of minds, he exuded a good energy. Ray would bet anything that when he was himself, Marcus was irresistible.

"The food is ready. I just need to bring it out," Ray told him and led the way to the little alcove that he called his dining room. It had a nice big window right next to it, and he had moved the chairs so that both he and his guest could see the view. Ray would be looking mostly at the parking lot and a wedge of the small park on the corner. Marcus would have Ray's usual seat with the view down a quiet, tree lined street. He had Marcus sit down and brought out the dishes one at a time not wanting to get acrobatic with hot serving plates and spill something in his agitation. When he brought out all the food, he made his excuses.

"I didn't know if you eat meat so I only made vegetarian."

Marcus only looked up at him. Ray wasn't sure what the look meant. It was kind of sardonic, maybe sympathetic. Maybe he was going to tell him he was a vegan. Ray must have looked frightened because Marcus spoke up.

"It's a lot of food."

Ray was relieved. If that was the only problem, they were off to a good start.

"You don't look like someone who can cook," Marcus said just as Ray was about to take his seat.

Ray looked down at himself wondering what about him gave the impression that he couldn't cook, but Marcus didn't elaborate.

They had iced tea with dinner, and at first they didn't say a word that wasn't about what Ray was serving him. Mostly Ray talked as he dished out the food. Marcus took a little bit of everything Ray offered him, tasted it all for his sake, but didn't eat much. He did finish his corn muffin. Ray made a note of that.

Ray wasn't worried that anything would spoil if left it sitting on the table so he didn't bother putting it away. Ray brought out the two pears and he and

his guest stayed at the table cluttered with dishes. Though he should have thought about more recent get-togethers with his friends, all Ray could remember were some long ago conversations over a dining table in just this state. No one would clear the table, not wanting to leave the company, and the family would stay and talk sometimes late into the night. It made him sad to think about the good old days with his family so he focused his attention on Marcus as he cut wedges from the pear. It was juicy and sweet, and Ray really wanted to take a big bite out of it, but that would have been messy.

Ray told Marcus a little about himself while trying not to bore him. Keeping it short, he said how his family had not been accepting of him after they found out he was gay. Not going into any detail, he told him he was on the street for a while.

"You can imagine how I made money," Ray said.

Marcus nodded and gave him a sad smile. But he frowned when Ray mentioned that he lived with Lionel for a time. He felt it was only right to tell him even though he knew Marcus wouldn't like hearing it. Since that was done, Ray changed the subject. Kind of.

"Lionel told me he blackmailed you into coming to see me."

"He did," Marcus confirmed it though he looked surprised that Ray knew about that. "And effectively too," he added. Though he had been blackmailed, Marcus wasn't acting like he really minded. He was being really pleasant toward Ray though Lionel had warned him he might not be.

"Tell me about that friend of yours. The one Lionel is putting through medical school," Ray said thinking that it might be a nice, neutral subject for conversation but hopefully not too tedious.

"You know about that too?"

"Lionel said some good things about him. And he must be important to you."

"Not the way you think," Marcus said a little defensively.

"I wasn't assuming. But you are here because of him," Ray pointed out.

"Do you have beer?" Marcus asked instead of telling him anything about his friend.

"I wish." Ray was genuinely sorry that he was out of beer for both their sakes. No wine, no beer, he was a terrible host.

"That's fine," Marcus said letting him off the hook.

"I have some vodka. I can Long Island that iced tea," Ray offered. He didn't know if Marcus knew that there was no tea in a Long Island Iced Tea, but he had his own suggestion.

"We can leave the tea and just drink the vodka straight."

"That's so uncivilized," Ray said as he brought out the vodka and two glasses.

The messy table didn't look as inviting any more so Ray motioned his guest over to the couch. Ray set the glasses in the middle of the coffee table

within both their reach. Marcus stood there for a while not taking a seat. He stared at the bottle and the glasses.

"I asked him, 'And what exactly am I supposed to do with him?' and he said 'Whatever he wants.'" Marcus said this as he stared at the booze which Ray was now pouring into the glasses.

"Sorry. What?" Ray asked. He had a suspicion, but he wasn't sure he knew what he meant.

"Those are my orders from Lionel." Marcus looked up at him. They were both now standing by the couch. Ray felt that there was an electric charge between them. Ray bet that Marcus didn't feel it though. He had heavier things on his mind. Ray decided to lighten the moment.

"You're supposed to do whatever I want. That's good to know. I'll have to think of something really strenuous for you to do. Maybe scrub the grout in my shower," Ray joked as he sat down.

Marcus sat down too. He drank half the booze he had poured him in one go. Ray refilled his glass. Maybe it would look like he was trying to get him drunk, but he didn't care. Since the only serious demand he had made was for Marcus to talk about the friend that Lionel had used as a bargaining chip, he talked about him.

"I met him when our maid brought him to work with her. She explained to my mother that she was afraid to leave him at home. The court took him away from his father for beating him so bad he put him in the hospital twice. Rita, our maid, was his aunt. She had custody, but she was afraid his father would come after the kid while she was at work. Arthur was the quietest kid you ever saw. I never even knew a kid could sit still and not make any noise for hours. And he was a smart little guy. I mean he was little, but he was older than me. I always wondered if the beatings had stunted his growth. If something got damaged. Can you imagine someone hitting a little kid like that?" Marcus shook his head. "Anyway. We got to be friends, but we lost touch later. He was a good student, but I heard he got into some trouble in high school because of his cousins so he couldn't get a scholarship. I didn't like going to him, but Uncle Lionel stepped up when I asked him to help. He paid for Arthur's college, and now he's paying for his medical school. I couldn't cost him that. Arthur is already working while he's at school to help out his aunt. She isn't well."

Ray nodded turning the glass of vodka on his knee. He wanted to praise Marcus and his friend, but he knew they didn't need his praise. Ray could tell he was very fond of his friend even though they weren't close any more.

"You want another corn muffin?" he offered him instead of saying something about what a good person and a good friend he was.

"No. I'm fine." Marcus drank some more and offered his glass for another refill.

Ray poured the vodka and wondered what Marcus was like when he was drunk. He didn't have to wait long to find out that he was kind of belligerent.

Marcus stretched his legs under the coffee table almost like he was getting comfortable. There was a pause in their conversation, and when Marcus spoke he started things off in a new direction.

"So when you're not working for Lionel, what do you do in your spare time?" he asked Ray. Marcus was looking straight ahead at the turned off TV and not at him.

"I don't work for Lionel," Ray said thinking that there was a misunderstanding.

"Neither one of us would be here if you weren't one of Lionel's employees." Marcus said the word "employees" with bitter significance as he turned to give Ray a hard look. At that moment, he reminded Ray of Lionel very much.

Now that Ray saw what he meant, he didn't bother correcting him again to tell Marcus that he was doing a favor for his uncle. That wouldn't sound good either. He left it alone. Marcus was in a darker mood than he had been while they were eating. Maybe Ray shouldn't have given him booze. But when Marcus held up his glass again, he poured. Ray was really starting to doubt if he was up to this if he couldn't even refuse him a drink.

"So when does it start? The main event. What are we waiting for?" Marcus asked. He looked around like something was supposed to happen to start things off. Maybe he expected Ray to put on some porn.

Though it was clear that Marcus was talking about sex, he didn't sound like he was asking for it. He definitely didn't sound like he was looking forward to it. It was more like he was taunting Ray. Ray decided not to take the bait.

"I'm not in any hurry," he said with a shrug. "Let's just sit and hang out." Ray knew he sounded lame. He was kind of offended and maybe he wasn't doing a good job of hiding it.

"I thought you would be better at this," Marcus said. He turned to sit sideways on the couch. He stared hard at Ray again, looked him up and down.

Ray was uncomfortable with that appraising look in the familiar way he knew from before Lionel came into his life. Setting down his drink, he turned to sit facing Marcus. Trying to look unaffected, Ray refused to show him how he had made him feel. But he did want to tell him a few things.

"I don't know what you were expecting, but with that shitty attitude, you'll never know how good I am. Your loss. That's not why we're here anyway. I just happen to be good company. Just how good will remain a mystery to the likes of you." Ray tried to sound confident, maybe even cocky. But he probably just sounded petty.

What he said didn't make any difference anyway. He didn't think Marcus even heard him. Marcus stared at him like he couldn't see him. It was a terrible look, like someone staring into the past and only seeing the ugly things lurking there.

Suddenly his vision focused on Ray again.

"Is a hot fuck from you supposed to cure me? Is it supposed to make me feel better that I killed my brother and sister?" The anger in his voice was so powerful, Ray held his breath. But he noticed that Marcus didn't say stepbrother and stepsister like Lionel had. It was obvious that's not how he thought of them. That was even worse.

"What were you and your brother fighting about?" Ray asked. He didn't know why he did it. It just came out.

Marcus laughed a laugh that looked like it hurt. He leaned over, like his chest or his stomach were in terrible pain. Staying hunched over, he started talking.

"He wanted me to cover for him so he could go to this party he wasn't supposed to go to. I wouldn't do it. I told him some stuff he didn't want to hear about his asshole friends mostly. He got mad, called me names. He called me a fag. He did that whenever we would fight. He didn't have a problem with it the rest of the time. But I let him get me worked up. I remember Vicky yelling at me to slow down, but I tuned her out. She screamed at us to stop fighting just before we crashed. We were saying terrible things, and then the car was spinning from the impact. Someone had skidded into our lane, slammed into us and pushed us off the road. Then it was all over," Marcus said, but Ray knew it wasn't all over for him only for them.

"They wouldn't want you to die too," Ray said. He knew it wasn't a good idea to say that, to speak for them. He just felt it was so true that it had to be said. Marcus didn't take it well.

"What the fuck do you know? I'm getting a sympathy fuck on my uncle's dime. You know what that makes you?" His eyes blazed as he said it.

"It makes me what I used to be before I met your uncle." Ray told him truthfully. He wasn't going to lie or be ashamed.

"Are you saying my uncle played good Samaritan once again? What a shock. What a surprise. So you used to be everybody's whore, now you're just my uncle's."

Marcus still looked blindly toward him as he tried to insult him. He didn't exactly hit the mark. Ray was mad but he knew the real source of his anger. And that anger had only one target and that was Marcus himself.

"You can believe whatever you want about it. But yes, that's what I did before your uncle saved me." Ray emphasized those last few words.

"If I'm here then you're still doing it. What the hell. Let's get on with it. Give me the treatment. Give me the good stuff. Come on. Let's have some sex therapy." Leaning toward him, Marcus ran his hand along Ray's thigh pulling him toward him lightly. Ray didn't move. Marcus repeated the move with his thumb on the inseam of Ray's jeans. Ray tried not to, but he got hard. If only Marcus didn't have that sad look in his eyes, anything might have happened. He was unbelievably attractive especially when he looked so vulnerable.

"Lay it on me," Marcus said. Ray could tell that it was the booze talking. Marcus gave him a hurt look that pretty much demanded that Ray refuse him

even as he hooked his hand under Ray's knee and drew him closer.

In response, Ray put his hand on Marcus's leg, caressed him. He wanted Marcus, but Marcus didn't really want him. He just wanted to escape the pain. Ray reached for his face. He only touched him with his fingertips, and their lips brushed only for a second before Marcus stood up. It was like Ray had burned him. He was breathing hard.

"Do it right or don't bother," he finally said. He turned to look at Ray sideways. He looked scared. "Strip, show me what you got, then use it. Don't fuck around with me." His words were harsh. There was a mean look creeping into his eyes to accompany his words but mostly Ray saw fear.

No, he wasn't going to fuck around. Ray made a decision.

"Maybe you should go sleep it off." Ray was standing too now, using his height to look down at Marcus. "It was nice meeting you. I'll call you about next time. Now you better go." He sounded more cool and decisive than he felt. God, why did Marcus have to look like that? He was so devastating, attractive, hurting. And Ray had to throw him out for his own good.

For a minute Marcus just stared at him like what Ray said was in a foreign language. Then he started to leave. He moved slowly, like he was drugged though Ray didn't think it was because of the booze. When it seemed like he might forget his jacket, Ray handed it to him without a word. Marcus looked blank as he went past him while Ray stood back afraid of accidentally touching him. He wasn't afraid of how Marcus might react. Ray was afraid that all his resolve would crumble if there was any physical contact between them.

*

Marcus arrived at Ray's place reluctantly. Expecting some kind of sordid, paid for encounter, he had no intention of being nice. That wasn't part of the deal he made with his uncle. But as soon as he saw Ray and heard him stammering about beverages, Marcus decided to be on his best behavior. He wasn't sure what his best was right now, but he would try and be good for Ray's sake.

Ray struck him as being a little airheaded but welcoming and eager to be a good host. When Marcus ate the corn muffin, Ray beamed at him. It was strange, but in every way, Ray seemed genuine. Marcus couldn't imagine that a guy like him would have anything to do with his uncle, much less do his bidding.

It was too bad that Marcus couldn't stay a well behaved guest. He hated that he spoiled their evening. But something inside him was threatening to give. It was that same thing that sent him searching for a gun. Somehow it got redirected into the pointless flailing and ranting at Ray's expense. He was sorry he took it out on him. But afterwards, Marcus felt that the dark impulse

inside him was spent or deflated by his encounter with Ray. Now he found himself torn between hoping Ray wouldn't call and fearing he would never see him again.

*

Next morning, Ray was annoyed to realize it was Saturday. The reason he didn't welcome a day off was Marcus. He was on Ray's mind, and he didn't have enough to do to keep himself busy and distracted from him. Plus Ray had an obligation to make contact with him again, and it nagged at him. But that wasn't the only reason he was so restless. Ray felt things between them were unfinished. He had to see Marcus. He had been a good guest until Ray gave him booze. At the time, it seemed to him that Marcus needed it, that he needed a release. And he probably still did. Ray resolved to manage things better if he got a second chance.

After spending all day in a state of unbearable tension, Ray called Marcus again. When he answered right away, Ray almost laughed with relief. He had feared that his call would be ignored. Ray hadn't made plans yet so he told Marcus to just meet him at his apartment. Marcus agreed much in the same way he did the last time, out of obligation. Ray didn't care. He was just so glad he hadn't ruined things for good.

Just like last time, Marcus was late again. He came in looking the same as he before, unshaven, too thin, but no more sullen than last time. That was good. It meant that Ray hadn't done too much damage.

"Did you call me over here so you could refuse to have sex with me again?" Marcus asked as soon as Ray let him in. He didn't sound mad about it. He said it more like it was a joke.

"Maybe. It all depends on how rude and or drunk you happen to be at the time," Ray told him. He didn't invite him to sit. He had made plans for them to go out.

"So," Marcus said. "What's on the menu?"

"Beer. I deprived you of two things last time: beer and sex. We're going beer tasting," Ray announced as he grabbed his jacket but didn't put it on.

"I like beer, but I'm not a beer connoisseur. I'll take whatever is cold," Marcus said like Ray had offered him a trip to the dentists instead of an evening of beer tasting.

"Too bad. We're going anyway. This place has all kinds of beer, and we'll taste as many as we can get our hands on before we fall down," Ray told him as they went down in the elevator.

"I thought you didn't want me drunk," Marcus reminded Ray that he was contradicting himself.

Maybe he was. Ray wasn't sure what he had said exactly, but he was

going to deny it anyway.

"I don't remember saying anything about not getting you drunk. I just said you couldn't have sex with me if you're too drunk to appreciate me."

"Is that what you said?" Marcus was skeptical of his explanation and also a little amused.

"You don't listen, that's your problem. Let's go." Ray led the way when Marcus hesitated outside the door of the apartment building since he didn't know where the place was.

They walked down the tree lined street that Ray liked to look at from his dining table. The street was pleasantly shaded in the daytime, and it gave him a good feeling to walk under the trees any time. The place he had picked out wasn't too far. It was a nice stroll getting there, but they didn't dawdle. Beer awaited.

Jan's Beer Palace was decorated in rich greens and browns. It was both cozy and cheerful, and it smelled like the kind of food you want to have with beer. The lights had a pleasant glow, just bright enough to read the menu. The noise that filled the place had a jocular sound to it, the sound of people having a good time. They picked a booth and started looking over the menus. Marcus looked exclusively at the beer one and ignored the one with the food in it.

"All right. Let's get me drunk," he said.

They didn't just get drunk though. They also had some spicy sausages with sauerkraut and fluffy buns. Marcus didn't eat very much, and Ray resisted the urge to bug him about it. Then they got drunk very slowly on many different kinds of beers. Most of the beers tasted pretty much the same, but they didn't mind at all, especially later in their tasting.

As before, Marcus got a little testy as he got smashed. It just took him longer to get there on beer than on vodka. Ray had just asked him a question. It might have been about college or his plans, nothing that should have set him off.

"I like how you're so interested in me. You going to write it all down so you can report to my uncle?" Marcus accused him in response.

"I haven't reported to him," Ray asserted. And it was true. They hadn't even spoken since Lionel had given him this assignment.

"Yet," Marcus said, and he might have been right. Ray couldn't say for sure that he wouldn't talk to Lionel about him in the future.

"Don't finish my sentences," Ray told him instead.

"Finish them yourself then."

They were both slurring their words a little. It was true that Ray wouldn't have refused to discuss Marcus with Lionel if he asked. Ray couldn't refuse him. But Lionel was too smart to ask about Marcus. He wouldn't want to interfere and compromise whatever progress Ray might be making with his nephew. Ray wasn't sure that he was making progress though, especially with Marcus accusing him of spying on him for his uncle.

While he had stopped listening, Marcus had started saying something that

sounded irrelevant.

"It's in Hamlet. Hamlet's evil uncle sends these two guys to spy on Hamlet because he is acting crazy. And Hamlet has them killed. Makes them unknowingly deliver their own death sentences," he said.

Ray didn't like the sound of it.

"I've just decided that I don't like Hamlet or Shakespeare," he told Marcus. Ray couldn't remember if he ever even read the play or just saw a movie.

Distracted, Marcus was looking out of the window on the other side of the Beer Palace. It showed a stretch of water and the sky, both dark now. It wasn't obvious from where they were sitting, but there was a terrace for outdoor eating that looked out over the river.

"Let's go outside and clear our heads," Ray suggested and led the way out.

The terrace on the back of the restaurant was closed to customers. There was yellow tape strung in the way and a sign that said it was off limits. With the same thought in mind, Marcus and Ray looked around and saw no one who might stop them. They ducked under the yellow tape. The reason for the warning was obvious. A part of the railing had been removed and there was an unprotected drop beyond it. There was more yellow tape where the railing had been. It wasn't a long way down, but it didn't take much for some drunk fool to break a leg and file a lawsuit. They decided to be brave. They lowered themselves down under the yellow tape. They scrambled and got dirty, but now they were on the level of the riverbank. The water was only a few feet away. It felt like an adventure. And down there they were invisible. Ray felt exhilarated. Marcus did too. He was smiling and looking over the water.

"Do you think it's warm enough for a swim?" he asked.

"I'm more worried about dirty not warm or cold," Ray said. The weather was more cool than warm, as expected in the evenings at this time of year, but the water would be even colder. Plus it didn't look clean.

But Marcus didn't listen. He was already taking off his shoes, his socks then his clothes. Ray joined him mainly to make sure he didn't drown. They kept their boxers on so they wouldn't get arrested for indecent exposure, or at least they wouldn't get arrested naked. The water was freezing, but that didn't stop Marcus. He hissed as the cold water hit him but kept going in deeper. Ray was following but couldn't keep up. Every part of him was shriveling. Ray thought his whole body might curl up and turn back into a fetus. He shivered so much he was afraid of breaking his teeth when they chattered.

"I hate you so much," he managed to say to Marcus through gritted teeth when he caught up to him in chest high water.

"I think there are fish here," Marcus said with wonder.

"Why wouldn't there be fish? It's a river," Ray grumbled.

"I think one just brushed my leg. There it is again," he said with delight.

Ray didn't share in his enthusiasm for fish swimming around his legs in

murky water.

"Can we get out now before my junk decides to stay shriveled up forever?" Ray asked.

"I know what you mean," Marcus said and looked down at himself. Ray didn't want to think about what was happening in his boxers, in either of their boxers.

They started to head for dry land. Their feet were muddy. They wiped them on some grass as best they could. There was a breeze picking up so they were freezing. Wet and shaking, they did the best they could putting on their clothes and shoes. The clothes didn't help much in warming them up, just stuck to them, clammy and cold. They ducked back into the Beer Palace just long enough to pay the bill. Their waitress looked at them like she was surprised to see them back. Maybe she thought they might have run out without paying. Ray gave her a good tip after she offered them some towels to dry off with.

They sprinted back to Ray's place. No doubt they looked like lunatics, wet and running like crazy. But the weather was cooling off as it did sometimes in the spring. It was like winter was going to make a comeback. They shivered in the elevator and rushed into Ray's apartment. After hurriedly emptying themselves of some beer, they threw off their now wet clothes all over Ray's bedroom and put on his sweatpants and sweatshirts. Ray gave Marcus the yellow ones someone had given him as a bad Christmas gift. He never knew if they were supposed to be a joke or if someone just had terrible taste. Marcus gave him a wounded look because he looked like a banana in them. Ray insisted that they hang their clothes so they could dry and not ruin his carpet.

They had turned away from each other while they were changing. Ray wanted to have a look at Marcus naked, but mainly he wanted to get warm and also to piss away some more of that beer. While Marcus took his second turn in the bathroom, Ray put extra blankets on his bed. Without needing an invitation, Marcus climbed in bed next to him. They huddled, shivering under the covers then they were asleep.

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It took a moment for Ray to orient himself the next morning. It was Sunday. That was a relief. Ray was in his own bed with Marcus, in his yellow sweats, sleeping next to him. Not one bit of covering was left on the bed as they got warmed up then too hot during the night. They had kicked it all off even the sheet. At one point, Marcus tried to kick Ray off the bed too because he was pressed against him. Ray convinced him that he wasn't a blanket by kicking him back in protest, so he let him stay.

Taking the opportunity to examine Marcus as he slept, Ray leaned close.

Marcus's face looked pale under the stubble. Ray could see a few beads of sweat on his upper lip. Instead of staring at him like a creep, Ray decided to get up. As he climbed out of bed, careful not to wake him, he found he had more beer to get rid of. There was a slight hangover, but not too bad. Ray went and made coffee. He considered various breakfast options but then just ate a banana and laughed remembering Marcus in those sweats.

Ray got to laugh at him again as Marcus stumbled out of his bedroom scratching his head and yawning. Ray offered him a banana. He took it without seeing what was so funny.

Ray was hardly done pouring him a cup of coffee when Marcus grabbed it out of his hand with a heartfelt "thank you". He was sipping the black coffee before it could have cooled even a little. Ray refused to pester him about it. He was a big boy. He could burn his tongue if he wanted.

With more coffee for each of them, they stayed in their sweats on his couch. Ray sat there with his hair both matted and sticking up in places. Marcus demonstrated the advantages of extremely short hair by not looking like a crazy man. Ray had fetched the Sunday paper from outside his door, and they pulled it apart between them. It was nice to sit with Marcus on a Sunday morning, drinking coffee, looking through the newspaper, though Ray couldn't concentrate on anything long enough to do any actual reading.

He left Marcus to the newspaper and went to take a shower. After last night, he didn't exactly smell like a rose. Marcus didn't smell like any kind of flower either. After he was done, Ray offered Marcus the use of his shower and some clean clothes to change into.

"In what color?" Marcus asked suspicious that he would try to put him in another ridiculous outfit.

"Normal colors," Ray promised.

Listening to the water running in the shower, Ray pictured Marcus naked, soapy body. Ray did get a look at some of it at the river so he only had a few blanks to fill in. When Marcus came out of the shower dressed in his jeans and a t-shirt, Ray sighed. He wished Marcus wasn't dressed at all. Ray wasn't very subtle in his wishing. Noticing how he looked at him, Marcus stared back. It was a simple, straightforward look that told Ray that it was his move. Maybe Marcus was still wounded from his refusal the last time. Ray still wasn't sure if it was a good idea, but his legs just walked him over to the bedroom and to Marcus. Ray's body sometimes knew what needed to be done better than he did. And right now his body wanted to be close to Marcus.

As Ray went up to him, Marcus looked at him with welcome in his eyes. Ray could hear his breathing picking up. The longer he stayed there staring at him, the harder Marcus breathed. Ray reached down to pull off the t-shirt Marcus had just put on. Next he unbuttoned the jeans Marcus was wearing, his jeans. It was strange to be stripping Marcus out of his own clothes. Once

he stepped out of the jeans, that was it. Marcus was naked.

Ray could see some scars from his accident but nothing too bad. There was a cut across his upper arm that continued to his back. Both legs had signs of trauma. One foot looked pretty bad, but it obviously worked fine. Not being heart too badly probably made Marcus feel even worse about the accident, but Ray was glad. He hated to think of Marcus suffering. As it was, Marcus had obviously punished his own body in other ways. By not eating properly, he had lost mass though not definition. How Ray wished he was seeing Marcus as he had been. But he didn't look so bad even now.

Ray admired his skin, the color slightly darker than Ray's. But he didn't linger on any other part of him for long. Ray looked at his cock. It was semi-hard and gorgeous. Ray smiled seeing it. Marcus smiled and shook his head. He must have been used to having it admired, but Ray wasn't done admiring it. He kneeled down in front of Marcus, for a closer look of course. He looked up at Marcus to smirk at him. There was no doubt about how much Ray liked what he saw. Marcus's cock was a really good size. What Ray would consider the perfect length and thickness. It had a beautiful shape, like it was the original and all others were imperfect copies. Ray liked the dark, curly hairs too, the way they set off his superior equipment. Ray looked forward to getting his hands on all of it, on every part of him. But he wanted to make sure it was OK. So far Marcus was reacting well. In fact his cock had hardened just from Ray's attention which so far was strictly hands off.

"I'm going in," Ray warned him.

"Wow. What?' he stopped him. Ray stood up. He didn't even try to hide his disappointment.

"You're still dressed," Marcus said. That was his objection?

Ray laughed with relief.

"You scared me!"

Instead of saying that he was an idiot, Marcus started pulling on his shirt. He did it a little roughly.

"I was gentle with you," Ray reminded him.

"I don't have your patience." he was now wrestling with Ray's khakis. Since speed was his priority, he did it quickly but not nicely.

"You're borderline rude," Ray told him.

"Only borderline?" Marcus got him out of the boxers he had on a little more gently, thank God. Now he stared. And unlike Ray, he touched too and Ray gasped. He gasped for more than one reason.

"Your hands are a little cold," he told Marcus.

"Ran out of hot water," he said and rubbed his hands together.

"Sorry," Ray told him since he had probably used up too much when he took his shower.

Marcus tried again, handling Ray's cock gently but firmly.

"Better?" he asked this as he stroked him.

"Much," Ray had to admit. But he also had to stop him.

Ray took his hand off his cock and made Marcus sit down on the bed. Ray kneeled on the floor and grinned, eager to finally have his way with Marcus's dick. He kept his touch light at first, even his licks were gentle, teasing. Marcus breathed hard but didn't grow impatient. To reward him, Ray took his head in his mouth, just past his lips to suck on it and caress it with his tongue. Ray was a little nervous. He wanted so much for Marcus to like it, more than like it. Ray wanted him to love it, to be transported, even to be cured, as crazy as that was. There was a long moan to tell him he was doing the right thing. Ray went further and further a little at a time. Marcus was happy with his progress, laughing between groans. Ray found he enjoyed the contours of Marcus's cock against his lips and his tongue and inside his mouth. Though Ray could have played with his cock forever, Marcus threw his head back and his breathing got rough. Ray could tell he was trying to hold back, but he wanted him to come. Ray went deeper and sucked harder each time he took him in. Marcus groaned louder all the time then stopped. Then he let out a sound of release. As Marcus dropped flat on the bed, Ray was busy swallowing. While he wished he could have seen Marcus come, the sound and feel of it had been a joy to him. He had made Marcus feel good.

Marcus sat up slowly, with effort. He looked at Ray, who was sitting on the floor with his dick in his hand.

"Are you in love with that hand? Do you two have a deep and committed relationship? He wouldn't want to get in the way of that," Marcus teased him as Ray kept stroking lightly.

"Are you jealous?"

"I am. Come on. I want to break you two up."

Ray stood up in front of him. Marcus took his hand to bring him closer and to get it off his dick. Before Marcus could start, Ray took his face in his hands and turned it up to him.

"You're kind of cute," Ray said to him. It wasn't what he wanted to say. There weren't any words for that.

Marcus pulled him even closer. Ray was standing between his legs with Marcus's slackened dick wet against his thigh but starting to stir slightly. Ray looked forward to feeling it harden.

Marcus started by nuzzling his waist then lower and lower. Since Ray couldn't keep his hands off him, he rubbed his head and neck very lightly so Marcus wouldn't think he was pushing him. He licked Ray's balls then up his cock to the dripping head. He ruffled Ray's pubic hair which wasn't as dark as his. Unlike what Ray had done to him, Marcus started sucking with one deep swallow that almost knocked Ray off his feet. Ray leaned on his shoulders. Marcus looked up at him, mouth full of cock, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. His eyes were so dark. Ray knew he could get lost in them. But that would be fine because he never wanted to look at anything else. And he never wanted to feel anything else except Marcus's mouth on him. He sucked decisively then paused to lick him, to kiss the oozing tip. Ray was good at

making himself last, but he didn't want to tire him. He took Marcus's hand and dipped two of his fingers in his own mouth. When Ray guided his hand to his ass, Marcus didn't need further instructions. Ray stood with a wider stance and let Marcus's fingers help him come. Marcus established a good rhythm between his sucking mouth and his probing fingers. He went deep at both ends and Ray was his. He was coming. Marcus didn't swallow fast enough, but he licked up every drop that escaped.

Marcus fell back on the bed just like he did when he came. He looked up at Ray. Ray loved the sight of him like that. It was pure contentment. Ray burned all over, going from the contentment of a second ago into wanting him again. He knew Marcus was feeling the same way. His dick stood up, hard again. As if offering himself, Marcus stayed with his legs wide like they had been when he was making room for Ray to stand between them for his blow job. His naked body was spread out for Ray to ogle and desire.

Ray lowered himself on top of him slowly, wanting to align their bodies perfectly. He kissed Marcus and Marcus kissed back just as eagerly. In fact, he couldn't keep his tongue out of Ray's mouth. Good thing Ray loved sucking on it. After a good dose of kissing and groping and rolling around, now with Ray on top now with Marcus on top, their dicks were ready for action again. Instead of taking turns, they lined up head to toe. Ray took hold of Marcus's dick and rubbed it all over his face and against his lips. At the same time, Marcus sucked his balls and tongued them until Ray could hardly focus on what he was supposed to be doing to him. For a while, they synchronized their sucking, then they alternated, then they just went wild and did whatever they wanted. Marcus lasted longer than last time, and Ray matched him easily. It was a very close finish. Their cries mingled, their voices indistinguishable in shared pleasure.

Ray held Marcus too tightly afterwards while he breathed slower and slower. Marcus said his name just before he fell asleep. Ray almost woke him up to make sure he heard him right. Ray tried to stay awake and made some vague plans to make lunch. Only starting to consider the menu, he couldn't keep his eyes open. Instead of making plans, he was soon asleep too.

Ray could feel Marcus growing restless next to him. His movements woke him up. Ray looked at his bedside clock. It was just past noon. They hadn't slept long at all. Though he was the one who woke him, Marcus didn't fully wake up himself for a few minutes. Ray spent the time between wanting him to stay asleep since he knew he wasn't sleeping enough, and wanting him to wake up. Marcus stirred almost like someone fighting off a bad dream. Ray pinched him to distract him. When he was finally awake enough for decision making, Ray offered him a choice, "I can make lunch or we can fool around again."

"Fool around then lunch." That was Marcus's choice and a fine choice it was.

Ray pounced on him. He squirmed on top of him then ground against him until their dicks were poking each other. Ray held their two cocks together and rubbed. Though they were both enjoying that, he let go and slid down until he was lying on Marcus's legs. Ray stretched out his arms up to his chest as he sucked him.

"Look Ma', no hands," Marcus mocked him. I'm sure he meant "Don't look Ma'". Ray rubbed his chest and pinched his nipples. Marcus had a little bit of hair right in the middle of his chest, but he was smooth otherwise. That couldn't be said of his legs. They were hairy and felt nice when Ray switched to fondling them. Marcus was tangling his fingers in Ray's hair, trying to reach down his back. When Ray put his arms up again, Marcus massaged them. Ray loved that Marcus wanted so much contact because he did too. Marcus bucked and writhed when he came. Ray watched him come this time. He saw him smiling through the strain and the release of it. Ray moved up and took Marcus's hand then wrapped his fingers around his dick. Marcus let go and pulled him up until Ray was astride his face. Ray lowered himself slowly into his mouth. Marcus sucked then pulled his cock out and let Ray's balls dip between his lips. Ray was definitely getting the idea that Marcus liked sucking on his balls. Maybe it was everyone's balls he liked to suck on, but Ray liked to believe it was just his. Marcus gave his shaft equal attention then fingered his needy ass without being asked until Ray came.

Lying side by side, they were panting together, coming down from ecstasy to that lazy post-coital feeling. Ray was giving himself up to that feeling. Now he didn't feel like making anything for lunch and said so.

Marcus had a suggestion.

"We can have pizza. There's this place near here that has a deep dish mushroom that…" he stopped too suddenly for Ray to miss that something was wrong.

Sitting forward in bed like someone who had woken up from a nightmare, Marcus looked at him with bewilderment. He opened his mouth like he had to say something but couldn't. His eyes were filled with remorse and pain. Ray was desperate to help him, but he didn't know how.

"You got reminded of something," he guessed.

Marcus nodded, not able to speak.

Ray wanted to urge him to talk, but he wasn't sure if Marcus could get the words out or that it wouldn't hurt him more. Ray left him to decide for himself. He would listen but not push him.

Marcus stayed silent, looking lost. After a while, Ray got up and dressed. He gathered up the clothes Marcus had borrowed from him and put them on the edge of the bed where Marcus was still sitting as if in a daze. Ray picked up the clothes they got wet and dirty when they took that dip in the river and took them to wash. The laundry room on his floor was empty. He was glad. He couldn't pretend to have a cheery, meaningless conversation with a

neighbor just then.

When he went back to the apartment, Marcus was dressed. Ray told him to sit. He made them some simple sandwiches. Marcus ate half of his only because Ray had gone to the trouble of making it. His appetite from before was gone. They sat in silence. Marcus was lost in thought.

After lunch Ray thought Marcus might leave, but when he guided him to his couch he sat down obediently. Ray didn't think Marcus cared where he was. Ray read and let him be sad. As he turned the page and looked up, Ray saw that Marcus was staring at him. He had a questioning look. Ray had seen it before but not with this hopelessness and intensity. It was a look that said "What now?" At that moment it was full of such sorrow, Ray wanted to run either to him or away from him. He was asking him a bigger question than Ray could answer. He dropped his book and went over to Marcus. Ray took hold of him slowly so he could push him away if he wanted to. He didn't. Marcus leaned his head on his shoulder but didn't move otherwise. As long as he stayed like that, Ray knew it was OK to hold him. He would hold him forever if it would only keep him from sinking.

He didn't expect him to, but after a while Marcus started talking.

"Vicky hated mushrooms. If anyone even mentioned pizza, she would start yelling, 'No mushrooms! No mushrooms!' Jake and I loved them." Marcus moved away a little and looked at him. His eyes were dry. He looked calm. "I took them to that pizza place a few times. Jake and I always had the mushroom deep dish. Vicky liked the ham and pineapple. The last time was a few weeks before the accident. We went to celebrate a prize Vicky won at school." His eyes clouded over again. He was remembering too much, maybe too vividly. Seeing his brother and sister so clearly in his memory was too painful. He stood up. Ray knew he was leaving.

"You can be sad here just as well as anywhere else," he told him. Ray was afraid Marcus was going to go on one of those aimless, exhausting walks that Lionel had spoken about. Ray hated to think of Marcus all alone walking and walking, going nowhere.

"I don't want to bring you down," Marcus said but he didn't move. Ray took his hand and pulled him down to the couch again. Marcus slumped down then leaned back, threw his head against the back of the sofa to stare at the ceiling.

"I'm going to read a little, try to remember our laundry, and then practice my cooking skills and in general do boring stuff. I won't bother you," Ray promised.

Marcus looked at him and gave him a very thin smile. But he stayed. He even sat down with him for dinner. Though he tried to, Marcus couldn't make himself eat anything. Ray wished he could have stayed the night. But Marcus got into his own clothes, left Ray's behind, and walked out with a sad "thank you" which he almost whispered.

*

Marcus felt a little disoriented after leaving Ray's apartment. Memories of Vicky and Jake were mixed up with his time with Ray. He could hear Vicky laughing as Jake made fun of her and her nerdy friends. He could make her cry just as easily, and then Marcus would give him hell. Jake always asserted his right as her real brother. He could be such a jerk. But if anyone else made her cry, Jake was ready to beat them to a pulp for it. He was like that with Marcus too, a jerk to his face, defending him behind his back.

As the memories swirled in his head, Marcus realized that for just a minute, he had remembered Vicky and Jake without pain. It didn't last, but before that moment at Ray's, the pain had been constant. Their memories were always overlaid with a feeling of loss.

Ray had brought back to him the warmth of being in the company of another person. Next to him, Marcus felt calmed, safe. Ray's body was like a raft that kept him afloat. Even after the bad memories intruded, Ray kept them contained, manageable, kept his head above water. Though he was grateful, Marcus couldn't stay.

In a strange way, leaving Ray was like his last days in the hospital. He hadn't wanted to be discharged. He didn't want to face a world without his brother and sister. Pulling away from Ray had been worse. Ray was warm, giving, and wildly good in bed. He also wanted Marcus to stay. Even as he was letting him go without a struggle, those incredible eyes were begging him to not to go.

*

Knowing that he needed time, Ray didn't contact Marcus for two days. Instead, Ray spent some time with his friends but didn't mention anything about Marcus to any of them. They could tell something was on his mind. Their first guess was that it was a guy. But no matter how much they needled him and pestered him, he admitted nothing.

When Ray finally called him, Marcus sounded different. He said Ray's name as soon as he picked up. That was the first word Ray heard him say. It had a sound to it like Marcus had been waiting for his call. The agreement out of obligation was gone. Ray could swear that Marcus sounded like he was looking forward to seeing him again.

When Ray said they should meet at a restaurant, there was a pause. After last time, Ray didn't want to pressure him by having him come over to his place again. After the pause, Marcus cleared his throat.

"Not at your place?" he asked.

"Or at my place," Ray added quickly feeling like he might have

disappointed Marcus and shortchanged himself.

Marcus backed off from it though, and they went with Ray's original plan. They went to a nice Chinese place. At the end of the meal, Marcus fortune cookie read "Your wife will get fat. Buy sturdy furniture." Ray's read "This is not your fortune. Better luck next time." The fortunes caught Marcus off guard and made him laugh. Ray already knew what to expect but got his fun from watching his reaction.

They headed toward his place after. It was already dark. The night was cool and the sky clear. They looked up at the few stars that city dwellers are able to see. There seemed to be a lot of them anyway even if it wasn't all there was. Ray tried to imagine a sky full of stars. He was feeling greedy.

His greed extended to Marcus too. Ray wanted all night with him. Feeling a sense of heightened excitement and anticipation, he wondered if he should calm down. But Marcus kept giving him a lustful look on the way up in the elevator. Seeing that they were on the same page, Ray let his libido take full charge of his body and mind.

By the time they pulled off their shirts and pants they were both tenting their boxers pretty hard. Ray noticed that Marcus wore navy blue ones. Ray's were a classic white. But his main interest was in what was under the boxers. Though they had been in a hurry and taken off their own clothes so far, he didn't want to miss out on sliding those boxers down Marcus's hairy legs. Ray went over just as Marcus tucked his thumbs in the waistband. He knew what Ray wanted and stopped. After he slipped off his own boxers and kicked them away, Ray went for Marcus'. He took his boxers off with more ceremony, like unwrapping a really good gift. Once Ray had taken in the sight of his cock, finding that it looked just as luscious as he remembered, he kneeled, ready to worship it. Ray kissed the tip then kissed up the shaft until he could lick his balls. Taking his cock in his mouth half way, Ray sucked gently. It was a beautiful organ. It deserved praise, but he could only give it the silent kind as long as he kept it in his mouth. And that's where he wanted it. Ray paid attention to how Marcus reacted. His breathing told him where he was, if he should give him more or less, if he should pull back or push forward. Despite his own desire and eagerness, Ray eased off when Marcus breathed too hard and fast. Ray didn't want him to come before he had enjoyed him thoroughly, and Marcus had enjoyed him as well. When his moans became long, almost continuous, Ray sucked for all he was worth. Marcus came hard, and Ray could hardly keep up with his salty output, but he had to have it all. As Ray let him go, Marcus staggered a little and laughed. Then he leaned down to Ray where he was still kneeling. Grabbing the back of his head, he kissed him. Then he overbalanced and almost fell. Ray caught him but let him fall on top of him anyway. They laughed and started kissing again. The kissing went on and on. Ray's dick was aching for more contact than just brushing up against Marcus as they writhed on the floor with their tongues in each other's mouths.

Then Marcus let go of him suddenly, stood up and told him to wait. He went into the bathroom, and Ray waited like he was told.

When he came out Marcus stood over him and said, "Condom and lube." Ray's dick must have loved the way he said those words, because it stiffened even more. Ray and his rock hard erection got up and got the stuff from his bedside table. Marcus took the condom from him.

"As you were." He motioned for Ray to get back on the floor. Ray sat down again. Marcus kneeled between his legs. Leaning over him, Marcus drew his mouth over his cock very lightly. Then he rolled the condom on him. Ray looked up at him. Marcus smiled seeing that he hadn't known which way this was going to go. Either way was fine with Ray. He shrugged though he was sure Marcus could tell how much he wanted to slam his achingly hard cock inside his hole. Ray still held the lube and now he knew what he was supposed to do with it. He shifted so he could suck on Marcus and lube him at the same time. As he sucked his cock and he kneeled, Ray reached behind him and pressed a fingertip into his ass. God, he was tight. With just his middle finger, Ray felt an incredible closing of muscles and the shuddering of Marcus's whole body. Marcus pushed Ray's head back to make him stop sucking. Ray could tell he was over stimulated just from the fingering. No doubt about it, it had been a long time since he had been fucked. Ray worked that one finger in and out slowly, enjoying the response of his body, the squeezing, the suction. Marcus groaned almost like he was in pain, and Ray quickly added his index finger to soothe his need for more. When that wasn't enough, he added the third. Marcus pushed back to take it in. Though he fingered him forcefully now, Marcus still began to ride his hand. They were face to face, but Marcus was lost to the feeling. When he saw how Ray looked at him, he said, "Sorry. I need it bad." He spoke breathlessly, like a man out of control. He gave Ray a desperate, begging look. Suddenly Marcus pushed him on his back and straddled him.

"Get ready," he said. Marcus grabbed his cock which was as hard as it could get. He didn't ease himself onto it. He impaled himself with one merciless push.

Ray wanted to tell him to take it easy, but the look on his face was pure bliss. Marcus looked at him then and laughed. Though Ray was all the way in. Marcus pushed down more, then bounced and moaned with both contentment at being filled up and the need for release. Marcus rode him hard, making them both sweat with his effort. Ray guided his movements with his hands on his thighs, sometimes tried to slow him down. Soon, he could see Marcus was getting tired. Months of neglecting his physical well being had taken their toll. Ray raised himself and nudged him off. Marcus turned over to offer him his ass. As Ray added more lube, Marcus turned to say something.

"I know you want it hard, and you're going to get it," Ray promised him before he could ask for it. Why did he think he was adding so much lube?

"Get ready," Ray deliberately repeated his words from before. His voice

almost didn't sound like his own. It was the voice of a man who can fuck without mercy. For Marcus, that's who he was right then. Ray shoved in and Marcus pushed back to meet him, maybe not trusting him to be as ruthless as he wanted. They both groaned at the impact. Ray felt like sparks were flying between them. Though it had been a searing pleasure, he slapped Marcus's ass to let him know to behave. Still deep inside him, Ray took hold of his hips to keep Marcus steady so he wouldn't interfere with his thrusts. Ray didn't move right away. Instead, he listened to Marcus pant and moan. Marcus said nothing though, and he didn't try to force any movement. His trust was gratifying. Ray felt like he was rooted there, like he began and ended inside him. Then he pulled back and slammed in again. Marcus yelled and kept on yelling as he ploughed him. His head dropped to the floor, he was sweating and shaking under him. Ray's hands on his hips and his dick buried inside him were all that kept him from collapsing. The fast and hard pounding that followed drew a loud, desperate keening sound. When Ray reached for Marcus's cock to help him come, Marcus slapped his hand away. He didn't touch it himself and he didn't need to. He spurted as Ray pummeled his ass as hard as his muscles would let him. Ray slowed so he could feel the spasms of Marcus's hole and let it milk him dry. Ray came with a shout, his effort paying off for both of them. As he expected, Marcus collapsed, exhausted rolling away from the come stain he had made.

"Sorry about your carpet," he gasped out. Marcus had so much trouble getting his breath back, Ray got worried. "You were incredible," he managed to say.

"Don't talk," Ray scolded him as he rubbed his back. "And your ass is going to be sore for a week," he told him. Marcus laughed like that was the best news he ever heard. He opened his eyes to see Ray looking at him with concern.

"You did good. I wasn't sure if you had it in you."

Well, that was not a compliment. Ray didn't ask him what he meant by it. He might not look like it, but Ray could fuck.

At his urging, and with much protest, they moved to the bed. Marcus was lying on his side, and Ray was feeling guilty about his ass. As Ray was lying on his back, worried about Marcus's ability to sit in the near future, Marcus was perfectly content to drift off to sleep.

Ray took a little time to consider what he was doing. For one, he was forgetting who he was supposed to be doing this for. Everyone stopped existing. There had only been Marcus and his body pressed against Ray's, intimately connected. When they were joined, he felt like there was a heartbeat so strong that it filled him completely.

He woke up to Marcus caressing him. Marcus had been running his hand down his back, but as soon as he turned he took a hold of Ray's dick. Marcus's touch had him hard in no time. Ray pulled on him though he was hard already. They couldn't stop all night long. They kissed constantly their

hands were everywhere. Their appetite was inexhaustible, and next morning Ray was a useless wreck. He had wanted all night and he got it. All next day he was paying for it. At work he told everyone he had eaten something that didn't agree with him. He couldn't very well tell them he was dragging himself around, half alive because he was exhausted from too much sex.

*

While Ray was at work, Lionel surprised him with a phone call.

"I'm going out of town, just wanted to check in." he sounded a little rushed. It made Ray nervous.

"You mean you want a progress report?" Ray asked worried about how much Lionel wanted to know, how many details he might have to tell him or hide from him.

"No. Just … tell me something." he asked mildly. Lionel just wanted him to throw him a bone, so to speak.

Ray thought about what he might say that wouldn't be a betrayal of what he had with Marcus.

"We had fun," he said keeping it simple.

He could hear Lionel laugh on the other end. He had a wonderful laugh, and Ray was glad he had made it happen.

After he hung up, Ray felt the sting of not telling Lionel everything. He felt divided between uncle and nephew. But Marcus was the one who needed him. For his sake, he couldn't say more. What was happening was between Marcus and him, leaving everyone else out. Ray couldn't let even Lionel intrude no matter how important he was to him.

He let Marcus rest Thursday while he missed him terribly and had dinner with Lydia. Ray wanted to tell her about Marcus, about his dark eyes, the shadow of stubble always on his face, the shape of his jaw, the smell of his skin. But he couldn't speak about him. It was almost like he was afraid of breaking a spell. At the same time, he wanted Marcus to meet Lydia and his other friends too. Ray especially wanted him to meet Paolo to see if he could make Marcus laugh like he did him. Or maybe they would hate each other. But keeping Marcus to himself wasn't just a selfish superstition. Ray was also afraid of disturbing some precarious balance in him and setting Marcus back by pushing him too hard. So he didn't share Marcus or his thoughts about him with anyone.

On Friday, Ray called and told Marcus to meet him at his place. He was so eager to see him, he couldn't wait even for one minute. He groaned when

Marcus wasn't waiting outside his door like he wanted him to. Ray went into his apartment and decided to head straight for the shower. But he heard the elevator just before he closed the door. It was going down. Ray waited anxiously on the doorstep to see if it would come back to his floor. It did.

"Where were you?" he yelled at Marcus as soon as he stepped out of the elevator.

Marcus stopped, surprised at his greeting.

"You just got here. What are you complaining about?" he said.

Ray wondered if Marcus had seen him as he arrived, and they had just missed each other by seconds.

"I'm punctual," Ray told him having already noticed that he was always a few minutes late.

Marcus rolled his eyes at that as he came in and closed the door.

"Well you can always count on me to be at least ten minutes late. That's the same as punctual," he said against all reason.

"No, it's not. It's the opposite of punctual."

Ray was about to go shower and change, but Marcus looked him over stopping him as he headed for the bedroom. He examined Ray's work outfit which was the usual beige suit with a blue shirt though a slightly brighter one today.

"You look like a prep school English teacher," Marcus told him after studying him for a little while. "Is that where you work? A prep school?"

It wasn't a serious guess. Marcus was just hating on his clothes.

"You have foot funk," Ray said to him.

"What?"

"Your feet stink." It was true. Ray didn't really mind. It was a strong smell but not too unpleasant as feet go. Marcus looked down at his feet still in their shoes and shook his head. He gave Ray a fake hurt look.

"I was just trying to help you out. No need to go to war over it," Marcus said with a shrug. But his feet did stink even if it wasn't so bad. And if he was going to criticize Ray, Marcus was going to get some of it back.

Before Marcus started making fun of his clothes, Ray had been thinking of inviting him into the shower with him. In light of Marcus making fun of him, Ray reconsidered but decided it was still on. And as a preliminary to that, Ray wanted to strip for him. He figured that Marcus might like his clothes better coming off than on. Ray put on a show and stripped without music. First he had Marcus sit on the bed. Ray sent his clothes flying in every direction as he watched. Marcus followed his movements, looking pleased. From the way Marcus's eyes roamed his body, Ray was starting to forget all about that shower. But though he was naked and his dick was rising under Marcus's stare, Marcus didn't come any closer. He had on a faint smile as his eyes traveled up and down Ray's body but lingered the longest on Ray's cock and, when he turned, on his ass.

Since Marcus didn't come to grope him, Ray went over to him. He did it

slowly so Marcus could continue to enjoy the show.

"Want to shower together?" Ray asked as he ran his hands all over Marcus.

"I get to soap you up. It's a deal." Marcus stood up, pulled Ray close and kissed him. Ray could feel his erection just below his own.

His shower was small, but they were never more than an inch apart anyway. They didn't need much room. They kissed with water running over them, sometimes making Ray feel like he would drown in his own shower because he was too stupid and horny to stop kissing and breathe. They soaped each other up excessively, and Ray got shampoo in his eyes, but otherwise it was good, wet fun. They dried each other off with Marcus doing it more roughly than Ray did except when it came to the valuable and sensitive areas. Marcus knew to treat those with care for his own future benefit.

His bed presented a big target but they stumbled around kissing and groping so much that they had trouble finding it. They pulled everything off the bed but one pillow which Marcus put under Ray. Ray thought he might fuck him, but Marcus only fingered him and sucked him off. Ray had nothing to complain about. He liked how Marcus sucked cock, sometimes so gently Ray would swear he only felt his breath then harder and slower until he was feeling it so deeply he thought he would suck the bone marrow right out of him. Both the strong and light pull of his mouth were accompanied by the swirl of his fingers inside him. When Ray came, he bucked a little but Marcus still managed to swallow as much as he had to give. Ray kissed him for the taste of that familiar saltiness which tasted different on every tongue. It tasted the best on Marcus. But Ray told himself that it probably always tasted the best on whichever mouth had just made him come. Still the nagging thought that Marcus was different wouldn't leave his lust crazed mind.

Ray liked his taste and feel. The sounds he made drove him crazy. Ray was bringing out those sounds from him as he kneeled and wrapped his mouth and tongue around Marcus's cock.. As Ray sucked vigorously, he felt his own dick coming back to life. He wondered if he could catch up to Marcus. Ray slowed down and jerked himself fast while he sucked Marcus slow and easy. Seeing what he was doing, Marcus pushed his head back. Marcus kneeled too and started kissing him, diving deep into his mouth with his tongue. Marcus took over jerking him and Ray stroked him in turn. Then Marcus rubbed his chest and teased his nipples, having noticed how much he liked that. Soon they were head to tow. Marcus used his tongue to lick from Ray's balls up the shaft, then sucked and then did the same thing again. Ray loved it when all his equipment got that kind of thorough attention. Ray did his own trick of sucking him in deep and hard then sucking just the head on the next turn. He couldn't ever remember having so much fun. He liked that Marcus was always accepting of whatever technique he used. He didn't make demands or issue instructions, even when his mouth wasn't busy. Ray loved the freedom

to do what he liked.

Marcus came first, but with his come in his mouth, Ray wasn't far behind. They shook and gasped, coming down slowly, sweaty and intertwined. Ray turned over and wrapped his arms around Marcus though they were both too hot. Marcus didn't push him away. Ray fought off his sleepiness and went to get them cold drinks.

As he climbed in bed next to him, Marcus was staring at him.

"That's a pretty good body you've got," Marcus said. Wasn't he just full of compliments?

"Pretty good? In that case, that's a pretty decent ass you've got," Ray said to get back at him. "And I guess your cock is OK."

"Yours isn't bad either," Marcus said with a shrug. The compliments were just flying.

"It's good to know that we both meet the minimum standards in appearance."

"Works for me. Mediocre people have more fun and no one bothers them when they go to bars. I'm sure you know what I mean. They can drink in peace instead of fending off all those annoying advances," Marcus claimed then he smirked at Ray.

Ray tried to punch his arms but he dodged. When Ray went after him, he set off a wrestling match, which he lost because he was ticklish and Marcus wasn't. That's an unfair advantage. Marcus should have been disqualified instead of being kissed all over and fondled so much Ray thought he would wear out his beautiful ass from all the groping he was doing. Of course if body parts could be worn out that way, his dick was in even greater danger. It was too soon for that nonsense, so they stopped and Ray went to see about making them some dinner. Going out would have required more clothes than he was willing to put on.

Ray cooked in his jeans. Marcus was dressed only in his boxers, but then he didn't have kitchen safety issues to worry about like exposing vital parts to hot surfaces and sharp objects. Sitting on the other side of the kitchen counter, he was only a spectator.

Watching him cook, Marcus said, "Some day you'll make some man a wonderful husband."

"You bet," Ray agreed. But the thought of it seemed impossible. Admittedly, thoughts of him and Marcus sharing a life would intrude sometimes. They would shine bright for a second then he would shut them out. Ray had never before wished so much for someone to share his life. Not that he didn't want that. But it seemed greedy to ask for so much after the good fortune of meeting Lionel. At one time, all Ray wished for was to be safe, to have a real place to live, not to have to do things for money or for food, or so someone wouldn't beat him or cut him. That wish was granted. Ray didn't dare to wish for even more. He had met plenty of nice, attractive

guys and had plenty of good sex. No one could have everything, and asking for too much would just invite unhappiness.

Marcus noticed he was lost in thought, maybe even frowning with too much seriousness. Ray smiled at him. He didn't want him to read the gloomy things that were on his mind. But Marcus kept staring at him just as if he could see what Ray was thinking. Marcus reached out his hand, and Ray gave him his though it had bits of red and yellow pepper on it.

Along with those gloomy thoughts, his conversation with Lionel was starting to weigh on him. It was so brief and insignificant, but it bothered him to keep it to himself. So he told Marcus all about it. Marcus was annoyed by even that little bit he had shared with Lionel.

"Why did you have to tell him anything?" Marcus wasn't really asking for his reason. He was only expressing his displeasure.

"Because he cares and he's worried."

"No, he doesn't care. Marcus doesn't understand. Jake and Vicky were nothing to him."

"He does care. It's just that he cares about you more," Ray told him. But Marcus dismissed what he was saying as biased drivel.

"Yeah, I get it. You're his biggest fan." Marcus sounded angry, uncompromising. For a second, he was just like Lionel. Marcus had the same hardness to him. Maybe that was why he couldn't like Lionel. Marcus saw in him a reflection of his own potential to be harsh maybe even unforgiving.

"Are you afraid of my uncle?" he asked Ray suddenly.

"No!" he wasn't. Maybe that was only because Ray had no reason to be. But he had overheard enough of Lionel's conversations when he lived with him to know that people who crossed him had reason to be afraid, maybe not for their lives, but there were other ways to strike out at people. Ray didn't want to talk about it any more. He knew that if they talked about Lionel they would only argue. Marcus took him for granted, considered him corrupt. Ray saw him as his savior. They could never agree.

Despite that little bit of unpleasantness, Marcus stayed all night. Too often, Ray would open his eyes to find that Marcus was awake, probably hadn't slept for more than a few minutes. They joined each other in wakefulness in order to kiss sleepily and suck each other off a few more times. Ray knew Marcus couldn't sleep for long, and he was determined to at least fill his sleepless hours with sex, followed by a little orgasm induced sleep. That little bit of sleep was good for him, even if it didn't last. Marcus was awake again trying to lie still and not wake him until his hard on wouldn't let him rest.

In those moments of half wakefulness, Ray tried to remind himself of what he was supposed to be doing for Marcus, but the idea wouldn't stick. Ray wasn't his therapy. He wanted him too much for that. When it came to

Marcus, he couldn't help himself. Ray was greedy. In the darkness of his warm bed, he wrapped his mouth around Marcus's cock with a groan. The vibration he sent into him must have told Marcus how much he wanted him. They went almost to the edge then dragged themselves back to start again. Marcus was panting with need, out of control, hard and dripping, aching for him. It was so beautiful. Ray had never been so desperate for anyone's body. Ray never wanted him to leave.

It was early morning. The light was just turning ruddy. Ray was so glad that it was Saturday. If it was a workday, he would have had to call in sick. He went back to sleep since Marcus was snoring away next to him. Just before he was asleep again, he had time to worry that the sound of Marcus snoring made him so happy. That had to be a bad sign. Ray was in too deep.

Once again Marcus woke him with his touch. There was no better way to wake up. Ray had his back to him and let him continue playing. His hand moved down Ray's back then around to his chest. His fingers brushed Ray's nipples. Marcus did it absently not meaning to arouse him so much, but he did. He could hear Ray breathing faster and harder.

"I forgot that you liked that." Marcus smiled at him. He liked to be able to make him react.

Ray turned to lie on his back and closed his eyes to better enjoy what Marcus was doing. Ray moaned when he lowered his face to his chest and started nibbling.

"I guess you like that even better."

"Aha," he said or more like gasped.

"I can't wait for you to fuck me again," Marcus said. Ray had already told him he had to wait. He wondered if Marcus was trying to influence him with all his attention to his chest.

"I just can't get over how a marshmallowy guy like you knows what a dick is for and how to use it." Or Marcus just wanted to insult him.

"Maybe if you rephrase that, it will sound like a compliment," Ray told him.

"You fuck like a demon," Marcus said as he raised his face off Ray's chest only for a second.

"Your words are pure poetry," Ray said. "Could you find something between demon and marshmallow? Maybe sex god?" he suggested.

Marcus laughed at his suggestion.

"Don't pretend you aren't flattered," he said as he made his way up and kissed Ray's throat. He then reversed course and traveled back down his body. Marcus didn't stop until he had Ray's balls in his mouth.

He and Marcus were lying lazily, not willing to get up yet.

"So you like to read," Marcus said looking at his shelves of books like he

had only now noticed them. It was mostly popular stuff and a few classics, not exactly heavy reading material.

"Sure I like to read. Who doesn't"

"Lots of people," Marcus said, and Ray wondered if he was one of them.

Ray remembered how books had kept him company when he lived alone for the first time after he left Lionel's. He had worried then that he couldn't make it, that he would lose his job, his apartment and end up on the street again. The books had anchored him, calmed him, transported him. He thought of them almost like friends.

Marcus kissed his shoulder absently. Ray worried about where Marcus's thoughts might take him. It was time to get up. Noticing how thin Marcus was, Ray decided to feed him.

Ray made blueberry cornbread muffins. Then just to be safe, he made a few salty ones with cheddar. Marcus had a little bit of blueberry but finished the cheddar one. Ray considered breakfast a success.

Later that day, he told Marcus about his plan for them to go and watch a charity marathon in the park. It was organized by a gay youth outreach organization. Marcus grumbled despite the good cause.

"It's not a walkathon is it? Because I will not watch a walkathon, I don't care what it's for. I categorically refuse to watch people walking."

"I already told you it was a marathon." Ray showed him the picnic lunch he had prepared and packed in a big shopping bag while Marcus was showering. "We'll eat this on this great spot by the pond where they have ducks."

"Ducks too. Are we eighty? Are we senior citizens? Is that who we are?"

"Oh, be quiet. You'll love it," Ray told him as they left. He knew why Marcus was grouchy. He wanted to stay in bed all day and fool around. Ray wanted that too. But he thought about what Marcus needed. He thought maybe fresh air, some relaxing time outdoors might do him good. Marcus still looked like someone who had been sick, though Ray wanted to think of him as someone who was recovering.

Marcus did love their outing in the park. In particular, he loved yelling at the runners to pick it up. It could be called cheering them on if you stretched the definition. The runners took it well and waved at him as they passed. Maybe they felt encouraged. Marcus did have a nice voice, deep and pleasant even at full volume. He also enjoyed the pond, ducks and all. Ray didn't bring a blanket because he didn't want to carry it around. He spread out some newspapers and unpacked the food, sandwiches and snacks mostly. Marcus made fun of his "tablecloth" and ate a little more than usual and then took a nap right on the grass.

Maybe Marcus was right, and they were two eighty year olds. Ray pictured them as an old couple, settled, secure, committed to each other beyond any doubt, feeding ducks and taking afternoon naps. It was a sweet

thought as long as he didn't picture them naked at that age, their equipment failing, everything sagging. To get rid of those mental images, he looked at Marcus and wondered if the signs of recovery were real. Marcus still didn't eat much and his sleep was always brief and restless. But there were peaceful moments too, like now. It wasn't a good sign that Ray liked looking at him so much. Marcus was sexy even in sleep. Ray was starting to question his decision to lie around by a pond with ducks and no privacy instead of lying around in his bed looking at Marcus's hot, naked body.

He woke up when some kids started shouting near them. Marcus was already awake and staring at them, remembering. Some of the kids looked like they might be related, brothers and sisters, or maybe some of them were cousins. They were arguing about a game of touch football they had been playing. As they moved away to resume their game further on, Marcus followed them with his eyes. He looked haunted. Ray was determined to take him away from those kids and from the memories they stirred up. To break the spell the kids had put on him, Ray took him on a long walk around the park. Feeling refreshed, they strolled all over. Being on the move did Marcus good.

By early evening, they ended up at a restaurant by the river with a large outdoor space where they were playing live music. Ray didn't know what it was called but it sounded like New Orleans. It was the kind of music that transports you to a different place. Sometimes the words were in French, sometimes in English. The wait for a table was long, but they didn't mind except when the band took a break to everyone's disappointment. Once they were seated, they both had fish. Ray had his in a peppery wine sauce that he was hoping to duplicate. Marcus had his fried. It looked crispy and flaky, and Ray knew he could make that if he was only willing to stink up his apartment. Maybe if Marcus agreed to do what he wanted him to do one of these days, he might. Though he tried his best not to count his bites, Ray did pay attention to what he liked. He was glad to see that Marcus's appetite was getting a little stronger.

Though they didn't do anything more strenuous than walking, Marcus still looked tired when they went back to Ray's apartment that night. Ray got them beers as they chilled out in front of the TV. Marcus kept his hand on Ray's thigh. Sometimes he would move it up to his crotch and give it a little squeeze. Marcus did this every few minutes keeping him in a state of constant, unfulfilled need. As long as he could, Ray played along. Then he set down his beer, took Marcus's beer out of his hand despite his protests so he could rip his clothes off without spilling it. Marcus laughed at him as he got him naked hurriedly. No doubt, he was expecting some more direct action, but Ray started kissing his chest. He ignored Marcus's cock as it got hard but kissed him everywhere else. After the initial surprise, Marcus saw what he

was doing and played along too. They were both such good sports. Ray kissed him on the lips only lightly though Marcus opened his mouth for more. No tongue for him, yet. Ray pulled his body close but not too close. Gripping his ass, Ray brushed his fingertips over the cleft. Marcus panted and tried to grind against him. His cock got no contact. Until now, Marcus had kept his hands to himself like a good boy. But now he started to grope Ray, making desperate grabs as he moaned. Ray took pity on him and gave him a real kiss, his tongue deep in his mouth fighting for space with his. Marcus moaned when he pulled away, but smiled when he saw what he was doing. Ray took his clothes off just slow enough to see the tension mount in Marcus's body. Then he went to him. Letting their naked bodies meet fully, almost slam together, he let Marcus grind himself against him and he did the same. They had full body contact and a crazy rhythm going. They stopped kissing only to look into each other's eyes. Ray couldn't wait to feel him come on him and to come all over him. As it happened, they each had a hard grip on one another's asses, looking into each other's eyes as they grunted and their come mixed.

*

Next morning, Ray found Marcus in the kitchen, making coffee that looked way too strong for his taste. Ray stayed quiet wanting to enjoy the sight of Marcus shirtless before he let him know he was up. Marcus was only wearing his jeans and they weren't zipped up all the way. Ray could see the curls of dark hair where the fly stood open. How indecent. The sight almost distracted him from the crime against coffee Marcus was currently committing.

"You're making mud not coffee, you know," Ray complained.

"This is coffee. The stuff you make is weak tea. Just throw in the towel and drink tea if you aren't serious about drinking real coffee."

"I'll have to pour a gallon of cream into your death brew to make it drinkable."

"Death brew. I like that." Marcus sounded pleased with himself like coffee that didn't burn right through your insides wasn't worth drinking.

"Don't be proud of it. This stuff is not for human consumption," Ray told him.

He poured himself only half a cup of Marcus's version of coffee and topped it off with plenty of milk and a little bit of cream. It was pretty good that way. Marcus looked at Ray with disdain as he diluted his coffee.

"You are a coffee wuss."

Ray nudged Marcus out of his small kitchen and made some scrambled eggs. They came out nice and fluffy and Marcus complemented them.

"Mine always come out like yellow lumps of rubber."

"You're probably overdoing them."

"I don't like them runny," he said. Ray shrugged. If he couldn't see that there was something between rubbery and runny, that was his loss. It made Ray's cooking skills all the more impressive if Marcus couldn't duplicate what he made. Though he didn't want Marcus cooking for him, there was that thing he did want him to do. Not being able to fuck Marcus yet, especially the way he wanted him to, had been a little frustrating for the both of them. When he brought it up that morning and he refused him, Ray told him it was the price he had to pay for getting it hard up the ass. He insisted that Marcus's ass had to take at least a week off. Marcus wanted to overrule his decision. Ray said, "My dick. My rules." But he was too chicken to ask Marcus for what he wanted right then. As time was running out with the end of the weekend approaching, Ray grew more and more determined not to miss out on this opportunity.

They took a walk around the neighborhood while Ray got his courage up. As it got late, Marcus thought they might be looking for a place to eat, but Ray didn't want that. They needed privacy and possibly to skip lunch. Ray said he would make lunch and took them back home. As he pretended to look in the refrigerator, he finally spoke up.

"Since your ass needs a break, I can offer you a compromise," he said as he rummaged aimlessly in the shelves hoping that Marcus's answer would mean that there would be a change of plans.

"You could fuck me," Ray finally blurted out. He didn't think there was any doubt from the way he said it that it was not a compromise but what he really wanted.

He wanted Marcus inside him though he wanted to be inside him too. Maybe they couldn't do that simultaneously, but he wanted to at least take turns. Before Marcus, he had always let the other men decide, an old habit. But he wasn't going to go by habit with Marcus. Ray wanted to give and get. He wanted everything from Marcus, and he wanted to give him everything in return.

"I…" Marcus started to say.

Ray was already feeling a wave of disappointment as he heard the hesitation in Marcus's voice. Not wanting to hear his refusal, he cut him off.

"That's OK. If it's not your thing. No big deal," Ray said and turned back to pretend to search the refrigerator again.

As he bent down to hide his face, Ray could feel Marcus come up behind him. Marcus took his ass in his hands and pressed up against him so he could feel his hard on.

"I'd like to fuck you," he said.

"Really? When? Now?

Ray straightened up, turned around and stared at him eagerly. Marcus was smiling at him. Despite the hard on and the smile, he could tell Marcus was doing it for him and not because it was what he was into. But he also knew

that Marcus wouldn't regret it. Ray would make sure it was the best fuck he ever had.

As they moved into the bedroom, they were both a little bit nervous. It was the nervousness of excitement, anticipation, and a little worry that it wouldn't be everything they had hoped for. It felt like it was their first time. And in a way it was.

They stripped each other slowly, sharing nervous looks and smirking at each other. At first, they kissed sweetly then deeper and harder. Building up to the moment, they caressed each other, standing pressed together. Their touch grew more urgent and demanding until they each kneeled to take turns and blow each other a little.

Ray pulled Marcus to the bed. Reaching a state where he couldn't keep his hands off Marcus, he groped everything he could. Marcus was kissing the inside of his thigh and up to his balls. Ray felt his skin getting hot, burning up. It was almost too much. Ray couldn't settle down and accepted Marcus's attentions to his body. Ray had to have his cock,

Ray turned got on all fours then he waited for his touch. It came a moment later warm, firm, and urgent. As Marcus lubed him, Ray could tell how much he wanted him. His fingers plunged in deep and fast. This was the touch of a man who couldn't wait. Ray moaned with utter happiness and this wasn't even the main attraction, just the opening act, so to speak. His two fingers were such excruciatingly sweet preparation for what was to come. As he pushed back into it, the thorough fingering stopped. Ray groaned at the loss. His need was so desperate now. Ray could feel Marcus shift behind him and position his body for greater leverage. His fingers returned to probe the edge of Ray's hole. This was a teasing touch right before he entered him. Ray could enjoy the excruciating tenderness of it and still look forward to the fulfillment his cock would give him. He felt the warmth of Marcus's hands, their firm pressure on his ass cheeks. As he held his breath, Ray felt Marcus's cock nudging against his hole. Ray pushed back too eagerly and missed. Marcus held him still, more firmly this time, and pressed insistently until he was stretching him slowly, driving him out of his mind in the most wonderful way. Marcus obviously knew what he was doing so Ray didn't dare interfere. He let him set the pace. Once he was filling him, Marcus stopped. Ray enjoyed the completed connection between them like they were one being on the edge of incredible pleasure, perfectly in tune. Marcus pulled back making Ray shake then pushed in again sending a surge of power through him. Another thrust and the wave of pleasure made Ray's cock hard as steel. His whole body felt transformed into something harder and stronger than before. In that moment, Marcus was the center of his universe. His whole awareness focused on him, that piece of Marcus inside him, working his body, taking it over. It felt natural and perfect. Marcus's hands held him lightly at first then with a firmer grip as his thrusts gained power. Ray wanted to make demands,

do it hard, do it forever, but he just grunted instead as Marcus ploughed him. Marcus stopped just as Ray reached the edge of pain. Ray panted waiting for more. He hadn't even noticed how the sweat dripped off him.

"I think I like this," Marcus said as he lubed his cock again. He was a little out of breath.

"I knew you would," Ray gasped.

"This isn't the time for I told you so's."

"It's time to fuck my ass."

"So romantic."

"Don't tease."

"Thank you for this," Marcus said. His breath was warm on the back of Ray's neck as he spoke. Ray wanted to turn and kiss him, but Marcus straightened again and plunged inside him. Ray felt his power once more as well as his own. Marcus was pumping hard, answering a deep need in his own body and fulfilling the need in Ray's. His strength surprised, almost overwhelmed Ray. He held his position with effort as his pounding became relentless and unstoppable, reaching for the climax. Marcus came with a roar thrusting deep until Ray was flat against the mattress, pushed down under his weight. Ray felt him come, heard him groan his name several times into his ear. Staying inside him, Marcus pulled him up. Marcus breathed deep, heaving breaths. His hand slid over Ray's cock lightly, the perfect touch, all Ray needed in his state. Marcus's hand wrapped around with one final decisive squeeze and he came. Pulsing come over his hand and over his sheets, Ray yelled Marcus's name twice before he collapsed into a messy, happy, half conscious heap of spent flesh.

The rest of that day was spent in a daze. He and Marcus wasted the day together, never doing much and hardly moving at all. It was a good Sunday. That night there was no heavy action, but they still made each other come. Their need was constant never satisfied for long before it needed to be satisfied again. Like hunger or thirst, it seemed to be endless.

In the morning, when Ray woke up, Marcus was still asleep. One hand was under the pillow, the other one was curled in front of him like it should be held. Ray didn't succumb to the temptation to touch him. He let Marcus sleep, envying him as he dragged himself out of bed.

Ray's eyes were closing a little as he went into the shower. That previous day and night had been wonderful but not restful. His eyelids were heavy as he turned the shower to a colder setting to wake him up a little. Ray dressed quietly while watching Marcus sleep. Sometimes seeing a little twitch of his face or his toes, he'd wait for him to wake up, but he kept sleeping. It seemed like such a luxury to be able to see him like this. Ray wished he didn't have to go to work. Making sure not to say anything too sappy, he left him a note saying that he was wonderful and that he wouldn't be disappointed to find him

there when he got back home.

*

Waking up in Ray's bed, Marcus searched for him automatically. The amount of light flooding the bedroom told him that he wouldn't find him. It was midmorning on a workday. Ray was gone. For a while, lying on Ray's bed consoled him in Ray's absence. Then darker thoughts started to crowd his mind. He felt a sharp condemnation stab through him. How could he lie around comforting himself about a lover gone for a few hours? His brother and sister were gone forever. There was no lover's bed or morning sunshine for them. Marcus felt driven to leave this place full of happy memories. But he forced himself to stay long enough to write Ray a note. That's when he saw that Ray had written him one too.

Ray's note was a gently invitation that Marcus couldn't accept. He held his note for a long time just staring at the words and saying "I'm sorry." He wrote his own note, making sure not to put any sadness in his words.

After their first meeting, Marcus hadn't been sure he would ever see him again. Now he only needed to know when and where they would meet. He had no doubt that Ray would call, but he didn't expect it to take so long.

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Instead of Marcus, Ray found only a note on his bed. "I wish I could stay. Thank you for letting me sleep and exhausting me into it." That's all it said other than his name, but Ray couldn't bring himself to throw it away. As he put it in the drawer, he noticed that it was written on the back of Ray's note. His eye lingered on Marcus's handwriting, his words "I wish I could stay." Why couldn't he? There was his greed again. Ray had monopolized him for the whole weekend, and he wanted him to stay longer. Going out then staying in, it had been the perfect weekend with a perfect finish. Though it had been tiring, Ray was exhilarated by the thought of it and of seeing Marcus again. But he didn't dare invite him yet. It was too soon after more than two whole days spent together. Ray didn't want Marcus to get tired of him. Because of his stupid sense of restraint and propriety, by Tuesday night, Ray was aching for him.

Marcus was very curt on the phone when he asked him to come over. Even though he agreed very quickly, Ray was worried that Marcus was mad at him for some reason.

"Where have you been?" Marcus asked as soon as Ray opened the door to him.

"What do you mean 'where'?" Ray asked a little bewildered.

"You didn't call."

Ray was a little shocked at him.

"You have a phone too. You don't know how to dial?" Ray accused him though they had silently agreed to this arrangement, the time and place set by Ray as his "sex therapist".

As soon as he was through the door and it was shut, Marcus grabbed Ray's hand and put it on his crotch.

"That's where I am," he said. Ray could feel his rock hard erection through the rough fabric of his jeans.

With his arm hooked around Ray's neck, Marcus kissed him. Not liking that they weren't at the same stage of arousal, he didn't even let Ray breathe. Marcus unzipped him and stroked him until he was almost as hard as him then went into the bedroom ahead of him. Remembering where he kept them, he grabbed the lube and condom. Marcus threw the condom to him and pulled down his jeans but didn't take them off. He fingered himself roughly, even groaning a few times from the penetration of his own lubed fingers. Pulling his hand out of his way, Ray could see Marcus's dick sticking up, dripping with extreme arousal. Marcus bent double on the edge of the bed. Ray wanted him turned around so he could look at him, but he was moaning so loud Ray knew he needed to satisfy him quickly. He took the lube from him and applied more.

"That's enough, that's enough," Marcus kept telling him, but he didn't listen. Ray put more than enough. In his impatience and to help him out, Marcus spread his ass cheeks for him. Ray loved his naked hunger for his cock, and he pushed aside any worries. This was how it was supposed to be.

Sighing deeply at the intrusion of Ray's well lubed fingers, Marcus spread his ass wider. Marcus moaned as the fingers were withdrawn. He shuddered when the head of Ray's cock replaced his fingers. Ray pushed all the way in then pressed down so Marcus could feel it to his core. Marcus gasped and groaned loudly. Ray didn't let him rest. He fucked him with long, steady strokes to open him up for the more strenuous fucking he needed. Ray built up to it with each thrust, coming in harder until he was hammering him. There was a sound of pain, and Ray stopped in mid thrust, holding his breath. He was afraid to move in either direction.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Don't stop. Keep going," Marcus insisted, but Ray could hear pain in his voice and even in his breathing. Ray felt Marcus trying to overcome the dictates of his own body. He wanted to force himself to take more than he could.

"No way," Ray refused and pulled out very slowly letting Marcus's body guide him so there would be no more pain.

Marcus was disappointed but he understood that Ray couldn't hurt him. Ray regretted that he had fucked him so roughly, maybe too soon after the last

time. Now Marcus couldn't take any more even though he wanted to. Ray kissed each of Marcus's ass cheeks in apology.

Ray stripped him then himself. He frowned when Marcus winced as he turned on the bed to lie on his back.

"It's OK. It's going away," he reassured him. Then he said, "I'll never doubt you again,"

"When did you doubt me, and what did you doubt me about?" Ray asked as he crawled over him.

"You're so nice and sweet and … What's the word? Domestic," he said like nice and sweet wasn't bad enough.

Ray threw a pillow at him. Marcus caught it and put it under his head then continued.

"It's just hard to imagine that you are such a fierce fuck machine." he was making fun of him again. Not that Ray deserved better treatment since he had caused him pain. But now he was determined to make up for that.

Settling between Marcus's legs, Ray leaned down over his cock. It had slackened only a little at the pain and now was back to its full hardness with only a little help from Ray. Hearing Marcus catch his breath at the first light touch of his lips to the wet tip, he went slow. Ray let Marcus's cock part his lips, nudge them apart and slide over his tongue as he slowly inched down. Marcus panted. As the head hit the back of his throat, Ray stopped. Using his tongue along the way, he pulled back up. Marcus was writhing and cursing. Ray felt Marcus's engorged cock shifting in his mouth from his wild motion. Without meaning to, he was pumping into Ray's mouth. Ray loved to feel Marcus's cock pushing anywhere inside him, but Marcus stopped, making his body subside and wait for Ray. Marcus was such a good guy. Ray let his tongue play over his cock again to see if he could make him surge into his mouth again. His willpower was strong. Marcus threw his head back and moaned but didn't move. Seeing that he couldn't be tricked again, Ray gave up. Now he was sucking harder all the time, dying for him to come. Ray pulled him in so hard and so far he almost choked, but he didn't stop. Marcus came with a yell that thrilled him. His hot salty come was all Ray's. He gulped it down feeling happy. He only stopped sucking when he was ready to come himself. Joining his hand with Ray's for the last few strokes, Marcus aimed Ray's cock at his own chest. He groaned as his front was streaked with come. He wiped Ray's come off his chest in quick swipes and licked his fingers. Then he leaned down to Ray's cock and sucked the last few drops off the tip. Marcus pulled Ray down into a long slow kiss, their salty mouths wet, sliding, tasting. Ray didn't care if he ever breathed again. Marcus was the first to gasp for breath. He laughed. At that moment, Ray knew they hadn't just made each other come, they had made each other truly happy.

They jumped in the shower then ate some leftovers before getting back into bed. Resting a minute against the foot of the bed, Ray admired Marcus.

He gripped his feet, going gently with the foot that looked damaged, then slid his hands up his hairy legs. His hands went up his flat stomach to his chest. Lying on top of him, Ray flattened himself against him. As he kissed his shoulder, he enjoyed the press of their bodies, the fit of his body against Marcus's but especially his hands kneading Ray's ass. Lifting his head, he looked into Marcus's dark eyes. With that, he began to kiss his mouth, gently then deeply while he rubbed his head and his very short hair. Marcus was hardening against his thigh. Ray kissed his way down to his crotch, rubbing his face against the hairs that started under his navel. Marcus made appreciative sounds as he neared the target. The sounds got louder and more intense as he started sucking. Marcus let him do as he pleased for a while. Then, stopping him with a hand on his forehead, he sat up. As Ray got back to sucking, Marcus reached behind him to finger him vigorously. With those fingers sliding up his ass, Ray had to focus hard. He had to concentrate on what he was doing to Marcus, not so much on what Marcus was doing to his ass. Ray loved the way those fingers were pushing inside him. There were three of them in him now, plunging in, kneading his insides. Ray felt that Marcus had learned the workings of his body in a new way, reaching in deeper than ever before. Ray sucked to the rhythm Marcus set for him. Ray was guided by him. Marcus's hand moved him like Ray was his instrument. And Ray's mouth played on him like Marcus was his. They were seamlessly connected. They were one. They were an unending sound of pleasure that came out of Marcus and ran through Ray and then went back through Marcus again. Ray was saying Marcus's name in his head as he tasted him, as his come flowed down his throat completing him.

Marcus had hurried to get to Ray's cock before he came. He wanted Ray to finish in his mouth. He got his wish. Ray looked down at Marcus's dark head in his lap as he finished sucking him off. Marcus had pushed him back roughly, in a hurry to get his mouth on his cock before he started coming. Now he licked the last drops of his come from his lips and rubbed the back of his head against Ray's thigh. Looking at him, Ray felt that their connection from before was unbroken. Their coming didn't end it, which meant it wasn't about sex. Their connection held because it was too powerful to break.

Ray shook his head trying to dispel these strange thoughts. Marcus looked up at him. There it was, in his eyes. Did Marcus feel it too? But Ray couldn't even be sure of what he felt in his own mind, in his heart. His feelings were too sudden and too strong. How could he trust them? He had to wonder if to him, Marcus wasn't just a younger, more approachable version of Lionel.

As he looked at Marcus and tried to figure him out, Ray wanted to cover up how he had made him feel. But Marcus was looking at him so frankly and openly, he couldn't. Ray smiled at him like a fool. Marcus smiled too but then he pulled away from him and sat up against the headboard. And Ray had just reached for him to kiss him. Now he stopped. Something had happened.

Marcus looked around the room as if he was looking for something that was different, but he wasn't sure what it was. When his look passed over him, Ray couldn't catch his eye. Before he could ask him what was the matter, Marcus stretched out and closed his eyes. He wasn't sleeping. He wasn't even resting. It was more like he was trying to shut everything out, pull himself back and away from everything around him. Ray saw his breathing quicken then slow. They both stayed like that for a while, motionless. Marcus was lying there with his eyes closed, almost like someone pretending to sleep. Ray watched his chest rise and fall. He noticed the too prominent outline of his ribcage. His breathing never quieted enough for him to be asleep.

Ray's concern kept him awake for a while, but not long enough. He wasn't surprised that when he woke up in the middle of the night, Marcus wasn't there. Marcus had left silently. Though he searched, he didn't find a note.

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Marcus felt his heart slowly, painfully hardening as he walked away from Ray. He had looked down on Ray sleeping and said a silent goodbye.

Ray was a gift that wasn't meant for him. But he had opened it and claimed it without thinking. And all he had to think of was who had given him this gift. No doubt his uncle Lionel gave many gifts like these. He did have excellent taste. And in Ray, his uncle had unknowingly found something real under all that beautiful wrapping. But Ray was made to love and be loved by someone who deserved him. And Marcus didn't deserve love. He didn't deserve sleep, or rest. He only deserved to live as long as he remembered what he had done. With Ray, Marcus couldn't remember properly. Ray softened his memories, made him think of Vicky and Jake as smiling kids. And even their fights and the times they were angry at him or each other were only bittersweet not searing and streaked with pain.

He felt Ray hot and sweaty in his arms, just having come and smiling about it before he kissed him. Marcus allowed himself that one vivid memory before he shut him out of his heart.

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For the rest of that week, his phone calls to Marcus went unanswered. Finally, on Friday, he picked up. Ray did most of the talking. If he asked a question, Marcus answered in short sentences or single words. As he talked, Ray was working himself up to asking Marcus to meet him. When he finally did, Marcus said he couldn't come over. Ray said they could just go to a movie, but he said no to that too. Marcus didn't make up any excuses. All he said was, "Ray, I can't. I'll call you."

All Ray could do was hold on to that promise. As he waited for that call, he thought about how the last time he saw him, Marcus still had dark circles under his eyes. And there were times when they were together when Marcus just looked empty and far away. At those moments, Ray grew afraid that he wouldn't be able to call him back no matter how many times he called his name. Now he felt that same fear as he waited. Knowing himself too well, Ray knew he wouldn't wait for long. If Marcus didn't call soon, he would call him. Hell, he would hunt him down and… No. He waited instead, never letting his phone out of his sight. Saturday evening, Marcus came over without calling.

First Ray heard a noise outside his door. When he opened it, Marcus was standing there. Ray wanted to ask him how long, but he stopped. Marcus's face looked drawn, too much the way it was when Ray first saw him.

"Come in," he said.

Marcus came in slowly and looked around the same way Ray remembered him looking around his bedroom the last time he was there. It was like Marcus was back in a familiar place after years of being away, and he was searching for the small changes that would tell him that time had passed and things weren't the way they used to be. Ray held his breath.

"You have a nice place here," Marcus said in a quiet voice.

Ray was speechless. He wanted to scream at him that he had been there before. That they had fucked there, slept here, sat around doing nothing. But that was only for a few days, Ray realized. To him it seemed longer or at least more significant, but it was really so brief. Though Ray wanted to remind Marcus of everything they did together, he waited instead for the next thing Marcus would say and dreaded it.

"You're too good at what you do." Those were his next words.

Ray drew back like he could shield himself from what was coming by making more space between them.

"Don't say it like that." Ray knew what Marcus was trying to do. He wanted to make Ray let go of him by telling him things that would hurt him. "Don't insult me. I told you that part of my life was over."

Marcus didn't say any more. In place of whatever he had planned, he said, "I'm sorry." In the end, he didn't have the heart for it.

It wouldn't have worked anyway. Ray wasn't going to let him go because he tried to hurt him so clumsily. Ray would let him go because Marcus needed him to. But not yet. He had to fight a little.

"Don't you know when something is real?" Ray asked him.

Marcus answered with a hard "No." He gestured around the room. "This isn't real."

Ray wanted to scream again. He was talking to a crazy person. How could he win? What was Marcus telling him? It was like he was waking up from some too pleasant dream after recognizing that it was too good to be true. Now he was abandoning it as a fantasy, renouncing it. It scared him. Ray was

part of the dream.

Marcus was looking at the floor now, determined not to look at him.

"I didn't think I could feel this." He looked so unhappy about it. It was like he had realized that he had done something very wrong and was now confessing his guilt. Turning to Ray, he said, "You were too good to me."

"If I'm hurting you, I'm sorry," Marcus said. He had looked up and seen what he didn't want to see. Ray couldn't hide the anguish he felt. The desperation to hold on to Marcus was consuming him.

"If you're hurting me?" Ray said. How could there be any question about that?

"I thought you would be more cynical, not get so involved." Marcus shrugged pretending that what Ray felt didn't matter to him. But he could tell that it did. Marcus could only look at him in quick, painful glances.

"Because I used to get paid for it, I'm not supposed to feel?"

"No. Yes. I thought you might have learned not to take things to heart."

"Everyone falls sooner or later," Ray said, feeling hopeless like someone falling a long way with nothing to grab onto, nothing to save them.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Marcus's voice became rough as he said those words. He bent his head lower. Again he said, "I'm sorry" more simply, in one breath, just loud enough for Ray to hear.

Ray didn't want to hear. He didn't want his apologies. He wanted Marcus to stay, but he was gone. The door closed behind him. As soon as he left, it was like everything stopped. It was so quiet. It was hard for him to believe that he wasn't completely alone in an empty world.

He looked around his empty apartment but not the way Marcus had. Ray looked around the way one might look around a prison that offered no hope of escape. That feeling was inside him. It wasn't brought on by the walls that surrounded him. Ray had made some kind of terrible mistake and lost Marcus because of it. He had misjudged him, his state of mind. He had pushed him too far. If he had kept things casual, this wouldn't have happened. Though it sounded like it couldn't be true, making Marcus happy was a terrible mistake. Ray kept telling himself not to get used to him, not to count on him, but he didn't listen. He hadn't seen the trap he had fallen into. He hadn't realized that to Marcus even his own modest apartment was like a paradise that had to be left, that couldn't last.

Ray watched the darkness shift and move over the world. He lay on his back, stared at the ceiling as it slowly brightened with daylight. He wondered how many nights and how many days of nothingness he would have to live through if he couldn't get him back. Ray had no plans. That left all day Sunday free for him to dwell on his mistake and be miserable over Marcus.

After a day spent in his apartment, crawling around like a snail, sickened by everything he touched, he thought there would be another sleepless night

to carry him into the next day. Sleep snuck up on him at the last minute because Monday morning he woke up to the sound of his alarm. It was good to have to go to work. Ray looked forward to being depressed in another location not this pit of an apartment that just kept sucking him in deeper with its reminders of Marcus.

He stood up from his bed with a groan and stretched to force his body to acknowledge that it was awake no matter how much it didn't want to be. Ray stood under the shower too long. He wanted it to wash everything away, but it couldn't. It was only lukewarm water.

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When Marcus didn't come back and he couldn't reach him, Ray tried to hold on but he kept sinking, losing hope. Time stretched out. In his desperation, he called Lionel so he could tell him how he screwed up. Lionel invited him over that evening.

Stupidly, Ray thought Marcus might be there. When he arrived, he forced himself not to look around Lionel's penthouse searching for Marcus. Lionel motioned him inside while on the phone then went off to his office. Ray didn't really expect Marcus to be there. Lionel didn't play those kinds of games. Ray dropped into his plush couch dejected.

The interior of the penthouse was dim with amber light of the sunset filling the space through the giant windows. The furnishings were dark, modern, confident, but also inviting. This was Lionel's style, which Ray recognized from his other apartments. As he waited for him to finish up his phone call, Ray thought about how often Lionel moved. Though Ray sometimes suspected that he did it for reasons of security, he didn't think it was good for him to move so often, to uproot himself all the time, to never settle.

"I lost him," he said as soon as Lionel returned.

He almost thought Lionel might tell him, "What did you expect?" Instead Lionel handed him a drink and told him Marcus was doing better. Ray looked up at him eagerly, glad to hear it, glad for any news about him.

"That's thanks to you, I think. We are both very lucky to know you," Lionel told him with a smile. Ray stared at him. He wanted to make sure he wasn't being sarcastic.

Ray was gratified that Lionel was giving him credit instead of blaming him. But he wasn't as happy as he should have been. This had stopped being about pleasing Lionel a while ago. And he had to confess his big mistake to him.

"I got too involved with him. I went too far, too fast. I should have kept it casual. What if I set him back?" he was worried. He was desperate for Lionel

to reassure him and he did.

"I don't believe that. You did exactly what I wanted you to do. You showed him that there was something worth living for. That he shouldn't give up. You gave him something real."

Ray was surprised that Lionel was taking his blundering so well.

"But didn't I overstep with Marcus? Aren't you mad that I let himself get carried away with him?" he still couldn't believe that Lionel didn't hold it against him.

"I asked you to save a man's life. I can't blame you for caring too much," Lionel said simply. He could be so kind and understand though he was a hard man. Ray wished Marcus would get to know him like this, see what a good man he was.

He thought about Lionel and Marcus standing next to each other. It was strange that in such a short time, Marcus had eclipsed Lionel. Lionel was still important to him, but Marcus pulled at him in a way he couldn't escape and didn't want to no matter how much pain it caused him.

Lionel was giving him a wry smile. Ray looked down at the drink in his hand. He had barely wet his mouth with it. Taking a sip, Ray stared at the darkening, moody light of the setting sun. It suited Lionel and his penthouse so well. It was like he had brought the sky in line with his own taste. But for once Ray was not in awe of him. He felt differently about him. Lionel was someone new to him now. He was Marcus's uncle.

"I feel like everything has changed. Me. Even you." Ray made it clear that change wasn't good. Things had been easier before.

"And Marcus too. Marcus was this close to suicide when he met you. Don't forget that. You saved him. Even if you never see him again, you have that."

"I don't want credit."

"You want more. Then you'll have to be patient. He'll come to terms with it. You'll see." From his words, Ray could tell that Lionel had a lot of confidence in Marcus, in his strength. "You gave him a lifeline. He is strong and he'll use it to pull himself up. You shone a light into a dark room, now he knows light exists. He'll reach for it," Lionel was almost promising him that Marcus would return. Ray wanted so much to believe him, but it wasn't his promises he needed. It wasn't any promise. Ray needed the man himself to stand in front in him in the flesh and embrace him.

Ray recovered a little as he talked to Lionel about him and Marcus. He didn't feel like he was breaking any confidences. He talked because he needed to. Lionel didn't ask any questions. He didn't try to get any more information than he was willing to give. He was glad to hear so much about Marcus, and he was understanding too.

As Ray was leaving, Lionel stared at him with that fond look he sometimes gave him. He looked down at Lionel's strong hands which clasped Ray's.

"You did a very good thing," he said.

"I did it mostly for me."

"Good. That makes it worth even more because it wasn't charity or a favor to me."

Walking away in the deep red light of the evening, Ray was aware that this visit with Lionel was different from all the others going all the way back to the night he met him. There was something simpler between them now. Ray had still felt better in his company, like he used to. But as soon as he left, thoughts of Marcus pressed down on him again. Ray felt his absence like a weight that might crush him. The only thing he had to hold onto was that Lionel said Marcus was doing better.

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Marcus had been able to barge in only because Lionel had told his security people that he should be allowed to barge in whenever he wished. Though he claimed to be furious with Lionel, Marcus was really frightened, mostly of his own feelings. He carried with him a desperation to cling to his sense of guilt and loss. It was as if Marcus wanted to be saved from happiness and love. .If only he could be locked away where good things could never reach him. Though he raged at Lionel, he was really angry at himself. He probably couldn't be angry at Ray.

For a while, Lionel let him rage. But he also looked at him closely. Marcus was more alive than he had been since the accident. He was in turmoil, but that was because he had been shaken up by new feelings. Lionel almost envied him his youthful love, his inexperience. A lifetime of lost lovers had jaded Lionel. Now he put on his hardened skin and showed Marcus the door. How he wished he could sit and talk with him the way he did with Ray. But Marcus was both closer and further away from him because he was family.

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As time went on, the pain that started when Marcus walked away from him only deepened. Ray couldn't stand the thought that he would never see him again. He couldn't lose him. He would chase him down no matter how ridiculous he looked. Ray would make as big a fool of himself as it would take to get him back. But when he really considered it, that wasn't the way. Marcus didn't need some big show of his foolishness. He needed to deal with the very real guilt that was eating him alive. Compared to that, Ray's pain was nothing. But knowing that didn't make it hurt less. It only made him hurt

more for Marcus.

Going to him would be pointless as long as there was nothing he could say or do that could ease his pain. Ray could distract him from dark thoughts, but he couldn't banish them forever. It would have been better if he hadn't tried to. If he had kept to his strengths. Ray could have given him a little fun and pleasure, let him sort out the rest. He couldn't offer him anything real. Ray didn't have it in him. But, for a long stretches of time, he thought he did and that he could. He had been floating, carried high by thoughts of Marcus, of a life together. But he was standing on the surface of a bubble, not knowing it wasn't solid and the slightest pressure would make it burst.

Now, for his own good, Ray had to shake off this feeling. No matter how good it had been with Marcus, he couldn't lose himself over it. Ray had to hold on to something that was solid in his life. He looked around his apartment as if the objects in it could anchor him to reality. But everything there reminded him of Marcus. He hadn't realized that letting Marcus spend time in his space would change even the place where he lived into a place where Marcus had been.

But this was where he lived. Ray had to reclaim it. He kept busy with stupid projects. He spent days and days shopping for a slipcover that wasn't hideous and would fit his sofa. He refinished the coffee table. He scrubbed his kitchen from top to bottom, in and out. though cooking depressed him these days. Despite that, he did go over to Lydia's to cook. He wanted to practice making some vegan dishes. Plus he wanted to make her some decent vegan food so she would get to eat something other than that terrible, prepackaged stuff she was always buying. Ray wished he could teach her to cook, but she had no knack for it. She watched his cooking like she was watching a magic show. It did his ego good to be looked at as a kitchen magician.

Since he wasn't cooking for himself the way he used to, he wasn't eating healthy food as much. That meant he had exercised a lot more. He had other reasons too. It helped to empty his mind and to tire him out so he could sleep. And he was thinking that if Marcus came back, at least he would find him in great shape.

He had a list of projects now to keep him occupied. He painted the bookshelf and took the opportunity to reorganized the books. Ray forced himself to read and go out with his friends. But he never really stopped waiting.

His friends knew he had been down for a while, and they worried. Ray told them a little about Marcus. But he was still hoping that they would get to meet him, see for themselves who Marcus was and why he was so wonderful. Paolo said to him, "If you fed him, he'll be back." When everyone gave him dirty looks for saying that, he defended himself in his own way.

"What? I am not saying he is a dog. I am saying he is a man, and the two are exactly the same. And Ray, don't you worry, that puppy is yours forever," he assured him while everyone else gave him more dirty looks.

Ray only wished it was that simple.

Ray was looking at the one beer he had left in his fridge. He was wondering when he drank the others. Lately, he had been losing track of things. He left his keys in the lock then spent an hour looking for them. Sometimes he would find that he was holding an object in his hand but he didn't know why. Marcus had made him distracted and disorganized since before he even met him, and he still did that to him.

Ray reached for the lonely beer ready to put it out of its misery. At the sound of the doorbell, he froze. His heart started pounding so hard he felt like a fist was trying to punch through his chest. This had happened before. There would be a knock or the doorbell would ring. Ray's heart would become suicidal and try to jump out of his chest. Then he would open the door and someone else would be standing there. Maybe the delivery guy would be asking him to sign for a package for a neighbor. Or a neighbor would want to borrow some change for the laundry. Not this time.

"I don't know what's going on with me," Marcus said. "It shouldn't be this hard to stay away from you."

Ray didn't hide how glad he was that he couldn't. He let out a little laugh, tried not to have a heart attack, and held back his tears. When it looked like Marcus would just stand on his welcome mat, Ray pulled him inside.

They just stared at each other for a while. Ray stared because he couldn't think of anything to say. Marcus was staring at him as if he was a puzzle, as if he could solve him and that way regain his self control.

Ray offered him his one beer and asked him to sit down. Marcus shook his head. Soon his eyes lost focus. He turned half away from Ray. His thoughts were far away. Marcus was only with him in body. Ray looked at him, noticing the stubble, the short hair that was growing out a little. Marcus didn't look any thinner than the last time he saw him. There might have even been a little improvement. If only he didn't have that haunted look in his eyes.

"It's like you got lost somewhere, but you're not even trying to find your way out," Ray said not sure if Marcus would hear him or if it would matter to him what he said.

He heard him and he denied the charge.

"I'm not lost. I just have nowhere to go."

Ray wanted to tell him that he did and that he was already there, but he knew he would deny that too. Though he was sure that it was a bad idea, he wanted to reach inside him and set everything right.

"What do you see when you picture them?" As he asked him this, Ray knew what he would say, and he was right. After looking at him with surprise that he would even ask him such a question, Marcus told him.

"What do you think I see? They are dead, broken, bleeding." His voice was raspy and bitter as he spoke because he lived those images, and these grisly remains he saw had once been people he loved.

Ray wanted to make him see a different picture.

"But that's not who they were. Is it? Do they want to be that? To be remembered as broken bodies? They were people, kids. Think about them. Really think about them. Look at them and listen. What are they saying to you? What do they want from you? And don't answer with your own guilt. Answer truthfully. What do they want from you?"

He did answer truthfully. Marcus even smiled a little as he said it, like he could hear them yelling at him.

"They want me to get my head out of my ass and get on with living my life. But I don't know if I can. Even for them."

"Why not?"

"Because I owe them that much. I at least owe them to be miserable. That's why I can't be with you. You make me happy. And not just when I'm in your bed, or just sitting with you. I feel happy just thinking about you. It isn't right. I have no right to this."

There was his big mistake. By making Marcus happy, he had done exactly the wrong thing and ruined everything. But the truth was that he didn't just want him to be happy. He wanted Marcus to fall in love with him. Now that Ray could see the damage he had done by rushing him, winning him over didn't seem like the most important thing. Ray had to pull him back from that dark place where he thought he belonged. Marcus thought he needed to be punished. Ray's only hope was to try and convince him that he didn't.

"But you didn't kill them. It's called an accident because no one meant for it to happen," he said. "You argue in a car. You drive badly. You crash. It could be you or anyone. You might have been driving like someone's grandmother, and the same thing could have happened."

Marcus shook his head like none of that meant anything.

"What about me? What was I, just a vacation?" Ray asked him. Maybe if Marcus could feel something for him other than regret, he might turn his thoughts away from them.

"Maybe. Maybe you're too good to be real." Marcus looked at him almost like he was teasing him, so he teased him back.

"I'm not that good. I'll make you wear those yellow sweats again, then you'll see."

"You need to burn those."

Ray searched Marcus's face and body for some sign of hope. He hadn't deteriorated since he had seen him before. That was a relief. If he could just keep himself going, time might take care of the rest. Ray decided that Marcus needed to keep himself occupied until then.

"You should go to classes. Keeping busy would make you feel better," he suggested not expecting him to listen.

"I'm not looking to make myself feel better."

Ray met his eyes fully though he was prepared to see a coldness there, but there wasn't any. Marcus only looked sad and determined.

"You have to find some way to live with this, Marcus," he whispered maybe even begged. "You have to."

That's all he could really do, nothing more. Maybe all his experience didn't count for anything. It had all just been bodies. Now he was grappling with a soul, a lover and failing him.

And this wasn't what he meant to do anyway. Why was he pushing him? But he knew why. Ray was rushing him to recover so they could be together. He hung his head. Marcus noticed the change in his mood.

"I'm selfish. Sorry," he said.

Marcus didn't quite understand him. He took hold of his hand, and kissed first one side then the other. The feel of his lips made Ray want them everywhere. But too soon, Marcus let go.

"If there was something I could do, would you tell me? Would you call me if you needed me?" Ray just had to know.

Marcus didn't answer. Ray don't think he knew if he would or wouldn't. He understood how it was. Until the moment came, he wouldn't know. Ray could only offer him his hand. He couldn't force him to take it.

Marcus stared at his feet. So many questions filled Ray's mind. But Marcus kept his eyes down. Instead of asking stupid questions, Ray reached out. His fingertips touched Marcus's shoulder. Ray wanted his attention.

"I won't give up on you. I'll give you time. That's the best I can do," he told him.

Marcus looked up at him, teary eyed but smiling. Ray wanted to help him more than anything. And now he wanted to do that for Marcus's sake not just for Lionel or for himself. Marcus meant more to him than his own happiness.

Ray saw him swallow with difficulty. Marcus might have wanted to, but he couldn't say a word. He turned away from Ray but didn't move. He faced the front door but didn't use it. Ray went to him. He stood close behind him, wanting to touch him but worried that he would get pushed away. He finally overcame this fear. He put his arms around Marcus and hugged him from behind. Marcus let him. Ray hummed some nonsense because there was nothing useful he could say. Marcus stopped holding back. His whole body went still as he let himself lean on him. Marcus even reached up his hand to touch Ray's hands clasped over his chest. Then he pulled away and left.

Ray hated watching him leave. As he was left alone, he forced himself to hold on to the hopes he had built up around Marcus. Ray tried to think of him as someone just in the next room, or down the hall. He only needed to take a few steps, maybe turn a corner. Marcus wasn't really gone.

Seeing Marcus again was a thrill. It put his feelings in overdrive and he couldn't calm down. Ray thought about calling him, pestering him with messages until he couldn't take it any more and answered him. But he had too many things to say. And he wanted to be looking at him when he said them. Ray wanted to see his brow wrinkle. He wanted to see that sneaky half smile.

He wanted to see that look when he did or said something stupid. Anything he thought of saying into the phone sounded pointless and doomed never to be heard by him. It was all just noise.

He waited, checking his phone obsessively, looking around for him all the time even in the unlikeliest places. Ray stared out of his window thinking Marcus might come walking down that tree lines street and he would rush out to meet him.

He had to stop thinking about Marcus so much. It wasn't doing him any good and his obsessing over him wouldn't bring him back. Marcus had come on his own. Maybe he would again when he was ready.

To distract himself from thinking and waiting, he went to see Lydia. She wasn't as loud or vivacious as some of his other friends, and that was perfect for his state of mind. The way he was, Ray didn't think he could have tolerated his livelier friends without snapping. Lydia was so mild and unassuming that Ray had met her several times before he even noticed her. But when he finally did notice her, he saw what a kind, sweet girl she was. She could even look pretty when she took the trouble to highlight her warm brown eyes and did something with her long hair other than tie it in a pony tail. But Lydia wasn't about showing off. She knew how to just sit quietly in another person's company and not demand pointless conversation. She could also just speak reassuringly without prying. She was soothing and a good influence on Ray when he got all wound up and thought about doing something crazy to get Marcus back. Plus she had that nice old dog who always came to sit next to Ray when he visited. Ray was so wound up after seeing Marcus again and hardly even getting to hug him before he left. He needed the comfort.

He stretched himself out on Lydia's couch while she gave him green tea and tried to feed him her awful vegan snacks. Her dog came over so he could pet him then he settled himself where Ray could put his arm around him. How Ray envied Lydia her old dog and that she had never met Marcus or fallen stupidly in love with him.

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Nothing was the same since he met Ray. Marcus now walked the city restlessly, sometimes wondering if he might see Ray on the street, just by accident. He couldn't force himself to just stare ahead like he used to.

Before knowing Ray, he had walked like a machine, one foot in front of the other no matter how exhausted he was. Now he felt alive and aware. Lovers walking together caught his eye. The smell of food from the restaurants he passed reminded him of Ray and his food fixation. He would find himself buying something to eat almost compulsively, like his newly

alive body couldn't go without nourishment like it used to. But it wasn't just a physical hunger. Whenever he ate, he thought about how it would make Ray happy. If he thought about how he had made Ray sad, it added to his misery.

He had found a way to double his pain and also lessen it. Though he denied himself what he most wanted, it hurt in a way that told him he was alive. And knowing that Ray was waiting, he wanted to run to him. Now wherever he walked, he felt like he was walking in the wrong direction because he wasn't walking toward Ray.

But the strangest thing was that he saw Vicky and Jake with new expressions. They had never seen him in love. They never would. But Marcus could picture how they would tease him. Vicky would be gentler about it. Jake would be merciless. What hurt him now was the thought that they would never meet Ray, and he would never know them. Feelings like those told Marcus how much he had changed and what it was that he now needed.

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The little park on the corner had some nice shade. There were less than a dozen trees and only three benches. It was still good to have a little spot like that so close to his building. Ray mostly saw old people sitting there, sometimes people playing with their dogs. He was thinking of getting one himself. But he kept thinking that he and Marcus should go to an animal shelter and chose one together. Knowing that it wasn't healthy to put his life on hold for Marcus didn't stop him from thinking that way. Every other thought started with "When Marcus comes back". Now Ray lingered in the little park trying not to think about him. The few benches there were wet from last night's rain so he leaned on a tree and watched traffic go by.

It was Saturday and Ray had made it a rule for himself that he wasn't allowed to stay cooped up inside all day. Though he had to push himself to go out the door, Ray had gone for breakfast at a little diner and then strolled aimlessly, window shopped a little. Now he just loitered trying to make some plans for the weekend.

The man was only in the corner of Ray's vision as he crossed the street, but something about the way he moved drew Ray's eye to him. Ray stopped breathing. Would he go the other way or come toward him? Ray held his breath until he started walking in his direction, toward the little park. Now Ray wondered if he would see him. Ray was standing in the shade. Marcus wouldn't see him unless he was looking for him there.

Watching him as he got closer, Ray took a deep breath to prepare himself. He was giving it a minute before he drew his attention. In that short time, he tried to imagine Marcus's reaction and couldn't. Ray had to let him see him and then he would know.

As soon as Ray moved, Marcus turned to look his way and stopped. He

came toward Ray to stand under the same tree. Ray clenched his fists so he wouldn't pounce on him like he was a tackling dummy. Ray was speechless and staring. He wanted to scream and laugh and call him names for making him wait so long.

But he only said, "Marcus."

Marcus nodded like he didn't know what to say either. As he looked him over, Ray could swear that something had changed in his face and body. It wasn't just that he was eating better and looked healthier. Marcus seemed more alive.

Marcus took a few more steps so he was standing right in front of him. With him standing so close, Ray had to resist the urge to grab him and kiss him. Without warning, Marcus hugged him. The look on his face hadn't prepared Ray for that. Ray hugged him a second later and made up for the delay by hugging him that much harder. With their chests pressed together, their heartbeats were sounding like one bigger heart was pumping blood for both of them.

Ray let go so he could look at him again. They were in the shade, but there were flecks of sunlight that had sneaked between the leaves and dotted Marcus's head and chest. Ray touched these little patches of sunlight and saw them transfer to his own fingers. Marcus's hands caressed his face. He had that questioning look again. It was like Marcus was asking for some explanation. Maybe he wanted to know what he saw in an idiot like Ray.

Marcus's hands moved down to rest on his shoulders and then he was hugging him again. He shook Ray like he wanted to wake him within his embrace. Ray was fully awake and content, but also dangerously hopeful. Marcus felt so right in his arms, especially now that his body had filled in a little to regain some of its true shape. Though he could tell that Marcus's body was more muscular and solid, Ray was dying to see it for himself. As he held him, Ray could smell his familiar scent as well as the scent of the earth and the trees around them and also the car exhaust from the street. Ray wanted to stay wrapped up with him forever, but they separated again, though they stood very close to each other now.

"You were coming to see me," Ray said. Marcus had to be on his way to him.

"Lionel sent me to you. I went to him last week." Marcus delivered this unlikely explanation with a straight face so it must have been true.

"You did?" Ray was surprised that he would go to his uncle and glad too.

"I don't even know why. I wanted to tell him off I guess for getting me mixed up with you," Marcus said with a shrug.

"Hey!" Ray had to protest though that did seem a little more likely than a friendly visit between uncle and nephew.

Marcus smiled then looked sheepish.

"I wasn't nice about it. While I was yelling at my uncle, I may have used the phrase 'sloppy seconds'."

“Hey!!” Ray said this time really loud. There was no question that Marcus was talking about him.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it. Anyway, Lionel took up for you. He said I was a spoiled brat who couldn’t wipe his own ass without printed instructions, and that you were a nice boy who was worth ten of me. And he told me that I didn’t deserve you. Then he threw me out and said if I had something to sort out, to sort it out with you.”

Ray gaped at Marcus for a second. It was all so hard to picture. Lionel was ruthless. But Ray was sure even Marcus knew that Lionel thought the world of him, and that Ray was a just a pleasant diversion to him. That’s why he was so rough with Marcus and kind to Ray. Families could be so strange.

“I never took Lionel for a matchmaker,” Ray said instead of saying what he was really thinking, which was “That’s just a small dose of Lionel’s tough love.”

“Me either.” Marcus raised his eyebrows at the idea of Lionel the matchmaker. More seriously he added, “Sorry about what I said.”

“I might forgive you. It all depends on whether you stay.” Then Ray added earnestly, “If you stay, I’ll forgive you everything.”

Marcus looked very serious at those words. His expression was making Ray worry that he would give him bad news, maybe tell him he was going away somewhere. Marcus kept his voice low as he spoke.

“I had to stay away. I didn’t know what I could do about myself. I was a broken down thing. I wasn’t even a person,” he said. “I thought about calling you so many times. But you were not the answer. I had to find my own way out before I could go to you.”

As he paused, Marcus’s face contorted. He was remembering his inner struggle and the pain which was still with him. But then his face became determined and clear.

“No matter what, I want to live on. I’ve decided. I’m not all better, but I think I am well enough to offer you something.” He looked Ray in the eye before he continued. There was both an answer and a question in his eyes. “I can’t promise not to look back. But whatever happens to me from now on, I want it to be with you.”

At those words, it was like everything brightened in that one second. Ray was blinded by the world around him. There was a light wind in the trees that made the wet leaves sparkle. Ray could hear voices calling out down the street. The traffic seemed like a living thing, colorful and energetic stream flowing by. Ray felt like the air shimmered all around them. And Marcus was at the center of everything. Though they weren’t even in contact, it was like they were touching.

“Ray.” His name sounded so good when Marcus said it. It reminded him of all the times Marcus had shouted it, murmured it, whispered it, slurred it both in and out of bed.

“Come home with me,” Ray said. “I want to show you a good time.”

Marcus laughed at his simplistic invitation and took his hand. They walked to his apartment. The whole time, all of Ray's attention was centered on squeezing Marcus's hand in his.

As they went in, Marcus looked around his apartment and saw the changes.

"I've been busy," Ray told him. But neither one of them cared about the decor.

They were barely through the door and they stopped to face each other. Ray gazed at Marcus. He knew he must be looking at him with incredible hunger. Marcus swallowed. Ray could see he wanted him. Deep inside a part of him longed to rip Marcus's clothes off, lay him bare, take him, make him his again. All he had to do was grab hold of him and do it. Instead, he let Marcus get on his knees in front of him, undo his fly, take his cock into his beautiful, warm mouth. Ray let Marcus bring him closer to him, take him in where he wanted to be. It was like Marcus took him back in time, locked him in place with his arms around him and sent him flying at the same time.

Ray couldn't last. He lost himself in that feeling, in Marcus. Having come, nearly breathless from it, Ray dropped to his knees to let Marcus slide his cock into his mouth. Marcus hadn't touched his own cock before now. The whole time he was sucking Ray, he left it wanting, neglected, in need of love. Marcus saved his cock only for him. Now his hips pumped his cock in and out of Ray's mouth. As Ray cupped his ass, he could feel the muscles tense. His thrusting into Ray's mouth was so sure and unhesitating. He filled Ray but never choked him. It was a delicious feeling that couldn't last. Marcus came hard, flooding Ray's mouth as his almost anguished cry of pleasure filled his ears.

Marcus dropped back on the carpet in his typical way and sighed, "Oh, Ray." Ray was lying back too. He looked at them there, inches from the front door, still dressed, with their flies undone and their cocks spent. Ray laughed at how they had rushed. He then kissed Marcus's face all over until Marcus stopped him to draw him into a long, deep kiss instead.

They got up off the floor, shedding their clothes as they went to the bedroom. Standing naked, they kissed until they fell on the bed. Ray straddled Marcus where he lay and ran his hands over his chest. His body was stronger looking now, even more attractive. Ray felt the heat of his muscles under his hand, the texture of his skin. Kissing him, stroking him, he was arousing them both all over again, like they hadn't just come. Ray finished his exploration and switched to wetter kisses with more tongue. He stroked his fingers along the places where he planned to kiss him next. Lingering on his nipples, using his teeth a little, he made Marcus writhe and clutch at him for more.

Ray worked his way down Marcus's body to his navel then back up and heard him groan. Ray was going the wrong way, and Marcus let him know it

by pushing him back down lightly. Ray didn't let him have his way. He went up to his jaw line then hovered over his mouth not letting their lips meet. Marcus rose to steal the kiss he was denying him, and Ray laughed into his mouth. Ray slid back down his body, faster this time and felt him breathing harder than before, knowing Ray wasn't teasing now. He was going for his cock this time.

"Watch me," he told Marcus when he saw that his eyes were closed.

He did watch Ray as he licked and sucked him. Then Marcus sat up so he could reach Ray's ass and finger him. Ray groaned in anticipation as Marcus licked his fingers. The initial gentleness of his first, exploring touch unnerved him. Ray wanted to yell at him that he needed more. But he was a good boy. Ray suffered the slow, gentle pleasure with only shuddering and groaning to accompany it. Marcus's cock was his consolation. Ray sucked Marcus the way he fingered his hole. That was a clear enough message for Marcus to pick up the pace, and he did.

Marcus was stroking his insides faster and harder, stimulating Ray's need for him. His fingers were pushing in, drawing back then in again, curling inside him. Marcus was bringing him close but not far enough. He stopped, pulled Ray up and kissed him. Though he had been interrupted, Ray had to kiss him back. He had to grope him wherever he could reach. But most of all he wanted Marcus's ass in his hands.

He got the lube and condom. Marcus wanted it face to face this time and Ray did too. Marcus lay back breathing hard and smiling, legs in the air to give Ray access. Marcus was the one being fingered now. Ray moaned at his tightness. Soon his cock would be sheathed in it. Ray couldn't wait and he was so glad that Marcus liked it hard because that was how he wanted to give it to him. It seemed the right way to do it after so long. It was like he believed he could make up for lost time with intensity, obliterate their time apart, burn it away.

Marcus's eyes were half closed, his mouth half open, panting. With his hands on the backs of his knees, Ray pushed in. Marcus's eyes snapped open and looked into Ray's. For a while their eyes just stared, sharing something that words couldn't express. Though he couldn't go any further into him, Ray pressed down to make sure their connection was complete. Marcus groaned at the full length of Ray's cock inside him. He grabbed Ray's ass to hold him in place. But soon he was urging him to pump, moaning through each thrust while his insides still struggled to adjust, to open to him. Though Marcus was tight, squeezing him, Ray still rammed in deep. Marcus panted, arched, pushed himself up to be filled to the limit. Watching him become wild with arousal was intoxicating. His blood was pumping louder and louder. Ray couldn't struggle free of such heavy need. And Marcus was right there with him, breathing hard, pulling him closer and closer against him. Ray could feel the power of his body, some of his new, recovered strength. It exhilarated him more, if that was even possible.

Then Marcus put two fingers in his mouth. Ray sucked on them, moaning. Taking them out wet, Marcus started fingering Ray in rhythm to his thrusting into him. Ray's heart was beating so violently, so fast, he thought that he couldn't survive it. It seemed like a deadly, dangerous passion had taken him over. Ray was overcome by it, insane with it. They both were. Ray thought they might even hurt each other in their lust. But the pain was only the kind that led up to pleasure, that intensified it and then dissolved in it. Ray felt like he was bursting, exploding, and Marcus yelled under him and spilled his come between them. As they came, they held on to each other with almost painful fierceness, a determination never to let go.

Their bodies slowly loosened apart, while caressing, stroking, kissing. Marcus wiped them clean with the sheet as Ray ran his hand through his hair, a little longer now, wavy. Ray felt completely spent and filled to the brim. As they both dropped on the bed, Marcus laughed. His laugh was the best sound in the world. It was like music that reached straight to your heart. Ray wanted to cry with happiness and love. Instead he started to drift. Ray was on his back, Marcus on his side. So slowly that he hardly noticed, Marcus shifted so that he was lying with most of his body over Ray's to sleep there.

The End

Also by Trina Solet:

~Poison Heart - Vince and Cal were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake. Now Cal is in jail, and to get him out, Vince will have to betray their love. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now all he has to do is make sure Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

~And Manny Makes Three - Mark, a struggling college student, has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don't need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

~ Unexpected Dad: Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn't know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

~More Than a Manny: A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a

loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

~ My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story - For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.